This is the first article in an occasional series on Gestalt Practice in Complex Social Systems. The Gestalt approach blends four streams of theory and practice: Gestalt, Organisation Development, Leadership and Diversity enabling practitioners to bring a holistic, integrated and optimistic presence as they collaborate with their clients to improve effectiveness at all levels of system (individual, interpersonal, group, organisation, community and society).

Weaving Learning with Performance for Transformation

Heather Berthoud

Introduction

Change is happening faster than we can keep up with it. Covid19 has upended the world. Racial unrest, economic dislocation, more remote work, revised forms of social gathering, and unsettled and unsettling politics are all extant. Life in organizations confronts us with not knowing, or knowing for a context that no longer applies or will not for long. At the same time, admitting to not knowing is unwelcome by leaders and organization members and often by consultants even though confessing to ignorance is where learning and new knowing begins. Yet, rather than finding new solutions and risking failure, many of us apply what we once learned, paradoxically proving our ignorance.[i]

Given the need for learning at the ever-increasing speed of change, organizations may intentionally attempt to integrate performance and learning, eg through action-learning. However, participants first need to distinguish between learning and performance to engage these processes well. I became aware of this difference first-hand during the International Gestalt Organization and Leadership Development (iGOLD) certificate program (www.gestaltod.com). In the second of five modules, participants worked with organizational clients. We had the chance to make a positive difference while learning about Gestalt consulting processes and concepts. The session that introduced the client work included a continuum from learning to performance.[ii] We were invited to notice where on the continuum we typically located ourselves, where we were at that moment, and what the implications of that location might be. I naively thought that I was on the learning end. I learned viscerally about the difference between learning and performance, and the relationship between the two.

So began my curiosity about the distinction, range, and integration in myself and in client-systems of learning and performance. Through consultation including organizational change, leadership development programs, and racial justice work, I have seen in clients similar epiphanies and shifts in mental models and behaviors. For this article, I begin with distinctions between learning and performance and the consequences of emphasizing each. I then turn to how they can support each other and provide descriptions of how and why Gestalt approaches to change and learning support their integration.

Distinctions between Learning and Performance

Adults are often terrible learners. Concern with performance, looking good, and getting it right overshadow *the process* needed to achieve performance. We can convince ourselves we are learning when in fact we are stifling the freedom needed to learn. We often like to have learned, to have arrived at a new competence without the awkwardness of being a novice, least of all in realms where our reputation matters. According to Vaill,[iii] we approach learning as though we will magically achieve success without the hard work we fear. Depending on the adult, those learning projects could be any and everywhere - work, family, hobbies and more.

Nineteenth century philosopher and psychologist, William James, distinguished between knowing *about* something through reflection and abstract thought, and knowledge *of acquaintance*, through direct experience of situations.[iv] Dewey[v] saw learning and experience as interconnected. And Kolb and Kolb[vi] describe learning as an iterative process that cycles through concrete experiences, observations and reflection, theory-creation to explain observations and reflections, and active experimentation for the practical application of learning.[vii] Vaill[viii] contrasts learning as a means to doing, with learning as a way of being where *being* refers to the whole person. In this article I focus on James's notion of knowledge of acquaintance or learning from experience.

Because we can confuse abstract knowledge with embodied learning, leaders, participants, and consultants can be learn*ed* without being good at learn*ing*. Because people do not often distinguish between learning and performance (even if they do so cognitively), I begin teaching and client engagements with explorations of their recollections of learning in, and from, experience, as distinct from acquiring theoretical knowledge. For example, in the work setting, how do they learn in their bodies how to manage meetings of various sorts?

How do they present their ideas and works effectively? How do they encourage without controlling promising leaders? How do they engage new members who do not respond to established approaches? How do they build true community across cultural values and racial/social histories? Away from work, how do they learn anything - to cook, get along with neighbors, drive, or play a sport?

People see clear distinctions when they focus on what they are doing, feeling and thinking at each pole of the learning and performance spectrum. Then we explore the short and long-term consequences of concentrating on each. See sample responses taken from several sessions in the table below. Associations with learning include freedom, play, openness and creativity while performance connotes more seriousness and sober consequences. Learning is in *process* while performance is about *results*. Not that in work settings either is typically done fully or solely at its own end of the continuum. They usually co-exist and even boost each other. But the emphasis of one over the other creates clear and recognizable experiences for individuals, and predictable results for the systems they are in, as described below.

The Consequences of an Emphasis on Performance

Why would any sane adult in an organization not focus on performance? A learner knows neither *what* nor *how*, and if that state is tied to one's job, issues of fit and competence arise. Western cultures prize achievement. A performance focus drives towards certainty and control. While short-term results can include satisfactory task-completion - and that is not guaranteed - in the long-run people and organizations tend to fear the unknown and rely instead on 'proven' formulae. At best, people try a series of new, promising approaches - the flavor of the month - until they reach their goals but without a sense of why their efforts succeed or fail. Even if a method produces the desired effect, without a theory of *why* and an understanding of the conditions of the practitioner, the ability to transfer and adapt is missing.[ix]

	Learning	Performance
Doing	Exploring	Delivering the promise
	Experimenting	Doing what is known, proven
	Trying on	Executing
	Playing	Working
	Making mistakes	Getting things right
	Letting ideas flow	Adhering to 'rules'
Thinking	Few consequences	This is serious
	I wonder...?	I had better...
	What if...?	I know ... or I *should* know
Feeling	Playful, carefree	Serious
	Curious	Certain
	Wonderous	Anxious
	Confounded	Inadequate
Short-term results	Possible mistakes	Task-completion
	Discovery	
Long-term results	Expanded capacity, adaptation to changing conditions	Regimentation, well suited to stable conditions
	A culture of creativity	Fear of the unknown

At the same time, a performance orientation perpetuates the search for what is wrong and creates undue stress[x] including shame that causes people to avoid the possibility of failure. Bentley[xi] proposes four dynamics of shame that are present in performance-oriented cultures:

1. Acting to avoid shame is a primary reason for poor performance.
2. Being highly shame-sensitive militates against achieving promotion.
3. Shame is used in organizations to control and punish those who do not fit or who do not perform.
4. Shame reactions are themselves a source of shame, and people can easily slide down the same spiral until there seems to be no way out.[xii]

In short, as I experienced, an over-emphasis on performance leads people to "avoid the sensation of disappointment"[xiii] and so avoid their own growth and improved performance.

The Consequences of an Emphasis on Learning

By contrast, a focus on learning turns out to be both more fun *and* more productive. Melnick and Nevis[xiv] describe outcomes of an optimistic orientation that echo those of a learning orientation including energy to see possibilities, curiosity, creativity, hope, courage, strength-to-fail and, paradoxically, success and achievement. "It turns out that our brains are literally hardwired to perform at their best not when they are negative or even neutral, but when they are positive."[xv]

A long-term focus on learning turns learning from an event or skill to an orientation to life and experience, such that life, itself, and its component experiences are all learning opportunities, adventures and experiments. If that description sounds far-fetched, it is because we are a long way from a culture that 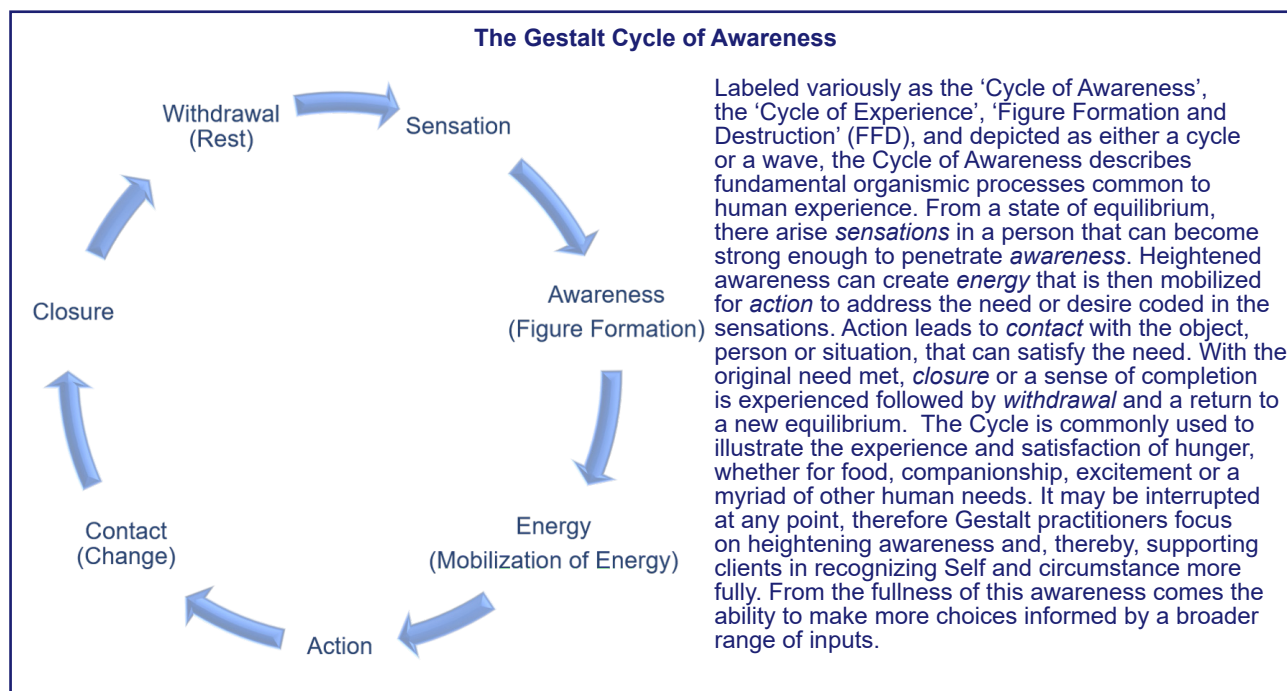embraces the idea of ourselves as learners. The ideal of the learning organization is intended to meld the structure and process of ongoing learning, flexibility, imagination and courageous contributions from all participants.[xvi] Yet, as we know, most organizations and the people in them focus on performance to the detriment of learning, enjoyment and better results.

The Interplay of Learning and Performance

Rather than looking at learning and performance as separate poles, I now see that the challenge is to integrate them for maximum effectiveness and joy. The relationship between learning and performance is summarized neatly by Fitzpatrick[xvii] in her recounting of the creative process. The early and often hidden or assumed stage of *preparation* - defining the challenge, collecting the resources needed for the challenge, and being curious about the problem allowing the creative project to emerge - is followed by *incubation* when the creative work happens below the surface, as in overnight or on a walk, and then *illumination* - the moment of insight. The final *verification* stage begins with evaluating the new idea, then planning, before implementation or performance.

Like the polarity of learning and performance, Fitzpatrick[xviii] identifies multiple polarities that creative individuals exhibit, such as playfulness and discipline/responsibility; imagination and fantasy, and a rooted sense of reality; being in control and flowing in the process; being certain and allowing oneself to experience confusion.

In the Gestalt 'Cycle of Awareness' (see below), *action* results from the often hidden and underappreciated processes of *sensation* and *awareness*. The work of a Gestalt practitioner is to increase awareness precisely so that action can be consciously informed and drawn from a broader range of options than mere reflexive reaction allows. Having broadened the range, the actor can be aware of more aspects of the field on which to draw.

The Gestalt Cycle of Awareness

Labeled variously as the 'Cycle of Awareness', the 'Cycle of Experience', 'Figure Formation and Destruction' (FFD), and depicted as either a cycle or a wave, the Cycle of Awareness describes fundamental organismic processes common to human experience. From a state of equilibrium, there arise *sensations* in a person that can become strong enough to penetrate *awareness*. Heightened awareness can create *energy* that is then mobilized for *action* to address the need or desire coded in the sensations. Action leads to *contact* with the object, person or situation, that can satisfy the need. With the original need met, *closure* or a sense of completion is experienced followed by *withdrawal* and a return to a new equilibrium. The Cycle is commonly used to illustrate the experience and satisfaction of hunger, whether for food, companionship, excitement or a myriad of other human needs. It may be interrupted at any point, therefore Gestalt practitioners focus on heightening awareness and, thereby, supporting clients in recognizing Self and circumstance more fully. From the fullness of this awareness comes the ability to make more choices informed by a broader range of inputs.

Learning is supported by heightening awareness of experience - feelings, images, thoughts, fantasies, sensations, dreams in the current moment[xix] along with awareness of the field of phenomena and of the conditions from which the experience arose. Then the learner can make connections, deriving meaning from the sequence and intensity of internal responses to external conditions. It is precisely such moment-to-moment awareness that can reveal preconceived ideas, habits and the like that can then be available for change through experimentation.[xx] Following such experiments, contact with Self and the Other creates opportunities for meaning-making and boundary-shifting, that is, *learning* including learning about once-hidden cultural boundaries and assumptions,[xxi] which allows for the application of the lessons to the next opportunity, that is, enhanced performance. Note the difference between this learning orientation and holding tight to the known as expressed in the desire to "get back" to "normal".

Importantly, each pole and all points in between, have their utility. Even the most creative learner brings a seriousness to the final performance, whether of movement, art or running a conference. And the person who wants to be an excellent performer must spend some time learning new ways to approach the craft. Even improvisation, the meshing of learning and performance in the moment, has its own structures and processes that its performers take seriously while also having fun learning, including learning how to set the serious judge aside long enough to let creativity flow.

As I have discovered for myself and have seen with clients, the cognitive understanding of the difference does not create the *ability* to direct one's actions easily. People may be disposed towards one pole or the other. That is, if one is predisposed to performance, the abstract knowledge of the ends of the continuum can be approached as a performance itself, as in "See, I know already". And if learning is where one leans, one can confuse any action with productive work. Few people are adept at moving along the continuum within a given context. Rather, they tend to separate the poles into different life spaces. That is, some may have a creative outlet or pursue a course of study, but those avenues are often separate from where they work.

I regularly see in client systems how the notion of learning as a doorway to better performance is regularly contradicted by a focus on performance. In one example, a leader wanted the staff to have an experience of effective and productive collaboration in service of organization-wide outcomes, rather than the siloed and competitive, antagonistic dynamics in existence. Even as she designed processes to support the staff in creative co-design, her focus was on collaboration and plans-as-product, not on the learning the staff might have from the experience. Through our work together, she included opportunities for staff to reflect on, and ingrain, their learning and, thereby, to begin to create the habits that could serve them in the future. In another example, a leader created an agenda for a two-day meeting and

put production first and learning at the end, as though learning comes only after productivity, and does not inform productivity in-the-moment. His implicit model of learning is *application* divorced from the moment, as if to say, "Go away and come back to the next performance better".

Options for Application

The challenge in organizational life is how to engage both learning and performance simultaneously and in mutual reinforcement of each other. Here are several approaches to the challenge. Vail[lxxii] identifies seven modes of learning that support the integration of learning and performance. Such learning is:

- Self-directed to address the holistic experience of the individual and to tap the optimistic drive.
- Creative or exploratory to include surprise at what is discovered or created as well as sometimes discomfort in the creative process.
- Expressive or learning-by-doing, to 'feel one's way along' to grasp the whole including roles, timing, relationship of parts to whole, and whole to context.
- Feeling - the subjective knowing that learning is happening, and the awareness of attendant emotions.
- On-line or in real life (IRL) which means learning can and does happen anywhere, beyond the controlled classroom.
- Continual, so learning is not just about learning new things but about interrogating the system of learning, and engaging how one learns as a developmental process that embraces being a beginner again and again.
- Reflexive about the mental models and philosophies of learning or learning about learning.

Action-learning and communities-of-practice are two ways organizations apply these concepts. Both take as their domain-of-action real work. In action-learning, groups work on a joint project and reflect on the technical problem and themselves, as individuals and as a group. Communities-of-practice draw together people who are working separately on similar challenges and meet to reflect on what works and how they are learning. [xxiii]

The Integration of Learning and Performance through Gestalt Concepts

Gestalt concepts and practices support integrating learning and performance in the world of work and help explain why they work. By engaging Gestalt practices informed by Gestalt concepts, we allow the interplay between learning and performance, to dance not only between poles but to transcend and embody them simultaneously.

Optimism

All organisms are open to, and shrink from, their environment. Evolutionary survival demands it. Our innate curiosity leads to exploration of, interest in, and energy for, the unknown. This openness to life is optimism. Shrinking

from the world is also necessary to deal with danger. An emphasis on shrinking creates an orientation of tension and fear. Learning is inherently optimistic and the Gestalt orientation toward positive possibility and the ability to embrace the unknown supports learning. [xxiv]

Conventional approaches to learning assume that "*learning begins in confusion and involves considerable inconvenience and pain* before it moves to a state of relative competence and comfort"[xxv] . With such an approach, learning feels dangerous. Hence conventional teaching assumes growth and development come from telling people where they fail - an approach that leads to disinterest and/or trying not to fail. But when people become aware of strengths and sources of success, they unlock their interest and capacity to learn. "Optimism stems from the Gestalt principle that *all of us are doing the best we can, given our assessment of the environment*"[xxvi].

Holism

The optimistic stance also assumes that the individual is a constantly changing, rather than a static, entity. The principle of holism, that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, acknowledges that a person or group is, at this moment, the integration of all past experiences and perspectives, and that the whole will change with the experience of current and future moments. In organizational settings, the individual is part of a group, the group is part of a subsystem (department, unit etc), and so on. So, as an individual learns and changes, so do the entities they comprise, even as those entities strive for stability. [xxvii]

At the same time, acts and actors exist in a context that is inseparable from the experience. The context or field comprises interdependent parts so that learning is about context as well as individual acts. Holism supports reflection by the individual on Self and circumstances so they can identify their learning from their current performance and bring it forward for the next performance.

Here-and-Now: Phenomenology

To recognize any condition requires 'here-and-now' awareness in which we witness our experience.[xxviii] Flight from here-and-now leads either to revisiting the past or to projecting the future, typically in a positive or negative fantasy, depending on our disposition and conditions.

A key deepening of here-and-now awareness is Bessier's[xxix] *Paradoxical Theory of Change*: change happens by accepting what is, rather than by trying to change. In the learning and performance dynamic, performance builds when the need to learn is embraced. As I learned, competence (performance) was possible only after I had accepted my incompetence, which then allowed for learning and subsequent competence.

The Cycle of Awareness as Learning

As previously discussed, the Cycle of Awareness helps

encode the learning process by focusing attention on phenomena including explicit meaning-making. Learning attention can be focused on external events, one's Self, one's relationships, and context.[xxx]

Experimentation

The Gestalt approach to change - "How about an experiment?" - is intended to create conditions that are safe enough for adults (in organizations) to attempt something new without a commitment to permanent change. If the experience and its results are compelling, change has already begun. It is a stance of "Let's see what happens", and openness to discovery. In that sense, Gestalt experimentation is like play where we ask, "What if…?"[xxxi]

The experiment is an adult portal to creativity and exploration in an organizational 'playground' where rules of habit are temporarily suspended. In experimentation, we can return to the urge to learn about the world, Self, others and relationships much as children do[xxxii] and with the analogous results of expanding the boundaries of knowledge, skill and Self to new edges.

Conclusion

While the work-world points people towards a performance orientation, they achieve better performance through a learning orientation. Given the cultural emphasis on performance at the expense of learning, consultants and leaders can provide a grounded orientation of the difference at the start of those organizationally-sanctioned opportunities to learn and perform simultaneously. Gestalt concepts and practices that ground experience in awareness, optimism and experimentation create openings for adult learners and organizational performers to bring their creativity and discipline to today's challenges. The pace of change and the humanity of organization members calls us to consider them holistically. And, given the predisposition of learners towards performance, we can support beginning again and again, that is, renewing the stance of being a learner as an end *and* as a means to greater performance.

There are few organizations, to my knowledge, that embrace the simultaneity of learning and performance. To continue the exploration begun here, we could identify those organizations and then discover how they manage to sustain such an orientation in the face of cultural pressures to focus on performance to the near exclusion of learning. To be clear, the separate if well-designed leadership development program is not the focus of this inquiry. Rather, it is the tonal, fundamental shift in the underlying stance of *being* in the individual and in the organization. What are the systems, practices, rewards and the like that are common and/or promising in such organizations? And if such organizations do not exist, where might promising experiments begin?

To work with such organizations or to work to bring them about, means leaders and consultants must

also interrogate their own relationship to learning and performance. As I discovered, the assertion of an orientation can be far different from the reality of the orientation. Therefore, leaders and consultants need our own communities-of-practice or other approaches to expand the breadth of our own learning and performance spectra, as well as the discipline to integrate the practices. For example, soon after my experience in iGOLD, I explored improvised comedy and painting. Through these and other practices, we can deepen our own comfort with learning on-the-fly, performing in-the-moment, and thereby create learning to share with our clients, be models of integration, have fun, and get results.

BIOGRAPHY

Heather Berthoud has practiced organization effectiveness for more than 30 years. She currently leads Berthoud Consulting, a trusted partner to organizational and community leaders that encourages organizations to experience, understand, and self-direct enterprises that are life-affirming in their means and ends. She combines a passion for social justice with a focused, practical results-orientation so leaders and organizations accomplish their goals, learn and enjoy. Clients and colleagues describe her as insightful, fun, straightforward, challenging and supportive.

She has been faculty for the American University Masters in Organization Development and is a member of The NTL Institute, and the Gestalt International Study Center. She earned her MS in OD from American University. She completed the first International Gestalt Organization and Leadership Development (iGOLD) program is 2015, the Art of Transformational Consulting, and is a certified Mindfulness Meditation Teacher. Otherwise, she hikes. She can be reached at Heather@BerthoudConsulting.com

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