

## **The Discipline of PLAY!**

Recently, on her radio show *The Next Hour*, Janet Coleman interviewed Carol Sills, improvisational games teacher, wife of Second City founding director Paul Sills, and daughter-in-law of theater games inventor Viola Spolin. One of the things Carol talked about was Viola's interest in – “the discipline of play.” And when I heard that, it struck me that “the discipline of play” is a key element of all the work we do at Laughter for a Change.

Two weeks into L4C's outreach program with students at the Los Angeles High School for the Arts (LAHSA) at Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools (as part of PLAY!, a collaboration with USC Annenberg School's Innovation Lab and RFLA Media Lab), the kids are already improvising some very interesting, honest, and funny scenes. In critiquing one of the best improvs, I told the kids that they “owed it to the scene” to be very specific in their space work so that the reality they built played to the audience. “Open the imaginary car door,” I side-coached, “then get in, close the door, put on your seat belt, etc. Take your time. Don't feel you have to rush. Establish the reality and everything (including the funny) will come out of that.”

A girl in the class enthusiastically responded, “Oh, you're talking about the details.” Exactly! Pay attention to the details because those details are the “rules” of the game. And, as in any game, the rules provide the structure within which you are free to play and to discover. As the Dalai Lama said, “Learn the rules, so you know how to break them properly.”

At PLAY! the kids are experiencing the fact that playful attention to “the details” can be an important part of the evolution towards new ways of learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Creativity and spontaneity are enhanced, listening and trust are developed, and empathic connections are made. In short, here is a model created for all of us to live better lives and also help our communities thrive.

I see the work we do at L4C as part of an important historical continuum. Paul Sills wrote about creating what he envisioned as “Theater for a New Community.” And Del Close, taking the teaching to the next level, saw “the discipline of play” (thought, truth be told, I don’t believe the word “discipline” was in Del’s vocabulary) as a pathway to a powerful and positive communal intelligence: “ the group mind.”

Crucial to the process of introducing this more open, less top down, and ultimately more relevant form of learning, is to re-introduce the term “discipline” to students, not as a punitive concept — something that happens when you don’t turn your homework in on time or when you disrupt the class — but more as a focus that can help you communicate your ideas.

At L4C, we use the medium of improvisational games and play to reset the perspective of students toward what “discipline” means. They experience, as the kids from LAHSA are finding out, that the games are simple, fun and failure proof. In this environment, the players develop a sense of individual safety and mutual trust in an environment that is constantly reinforcing the idea that “discipline” is a good thing and a path to delightful discoveries about how your talent can shine.

Ed greenberg