

## Mindsight at Work – *IPNB in Action*

(excerpted from *The GAINS Quarterly*, summer 2009)

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Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB) provides a framework for understanding how our social and relational minds and brains regulate and integrate (or don't), and defines process level guidelines for how relationship with self and with others can facilitate well-being, resilience, and mental health.

Imagine a group of teenagers with unstable lives, inadequate parenting, exposure to traumas, and repeated messages of their worthlessness experiencing the power of attuned connection and finding their voices through narrative, and you begin to get a sense of the impact of the 2-week workshop called PlayWrite. Offered in numerous alternative school settings in Oregon, this clearly structured yet unpredictable experience is infused



with IPNB concepts. Bruce Livingston, executive director of PlayWrite, has taken the PSU *Science of IPNB* course twice, augmenting his own studies of attachment and narrative. The son of a neurosurgeon with a former career as an anthropologist, Bruce has his mind firmly planted in both brain hemispheres. He balances awe for the powerful impact and the emotional/relational experience of PlayWrite with an academic and scientific curiosity about how and why it works. Bruce has honed the techniques in these

workshops, in which teens engage with trained coaches and develop a living work of art, which they then see performed by professional actors. The first week involves lots of “games” that encourage participation and safe engagement, mindful awareness, response flexibility, and an introduction to the healthy tension of dramatic conflict. The teens experience uncovering and expressing emotion, finding motivation, and becoming aware of needs through discussing and creating characters. The skilled coaches debrief daily so they can create a unique holding environment – an attuned witnessing – where they challenge teens by asking questions – Why would your character do that? What does she long for? What does he fear? The coaches are trained not to give any answers, suggestions, or ideas – even providing a word is forbidden – and to sit in lengthy silence if needed, to be always present and empathetic while challenging each teen to create his or her own original, coherent narrative. They function as scribes, freeing the teens from the mechanics of writing as they express themselves, and expressing their attunement implicitly.

The play each young writer creates during Week Two has rules – dramatic conflict involving two non-human yet earth-bound characters, and the emergence of a new narrative, not a pre-existing story about themselves or their lives. Working one-to-one with their coach, they choose three incidents from their own life to connect the two created characters and imagine *their* relational history. The coaches’ persistent questioning helps them discern the deepest want, need, fear, and secret of each. The conflict resolves (or not) through the struggles of their created characters as they relate to each other. When completed, the scripts are sent to professional actors. On performance day, the teen authors experience themselves as directors,

gathering to answer the actors' questions about their characters during a brief but intense rehearsal. Then, with a live audience in a real theater, they watch their plays performed. Performances are deeply moving for everyone involved, including the audience – an essential element in the creative action – as is the closing circle for writers, coaches, and actors.

The experience of the workshop encourages new self-definition and social engagement: months later, follow-up questionnaires have found improved class participation, increased engagement in conversations with adults, better communication skills, more positive attitudes, persistence in creative work, and more hope for their future, for the majority of the participants. Bruce has written about and continues to explore how the IPNB perspective helps explain the power and impact of PlayWrite:

- the teens are learning a number of self-regulation techniques,

- they are being respected and attuned to while being challenged – a secure attachment experience of respect and growth,
- they are learning to see dual qualities of consciousness/relationship through their two characters,
- they are developing mindsight while exploring the minds of characters and themselves, and
- they are experiencing the integrative power of narrative as they transform traumatic implicit memories and emotions into plays.

Knowing about how our brains work often increases compassion and patience as well as pointing toward more effective methods of change. IPNB helps us think about how to design content and processes that facilitate multiple ways of learning, and utilize the power of connection and narrative. Safety that allows us to risk and change, regulation, emotion, and integration become essential components, demonstrated in the power of PlayWrite.