Taking Charge®

Working in Partnership with Learners of All Ages and All Abilities to Empower Them to Take Charge of Their Own Learning Process

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Abstract

A basic premise of the Taking Charge® approach is that it is not an event itself, but it is our interpretation of the event that closes or opens possibilities for learning and effective, coordinated action to occur. Simply put, we have two possibilities: (1) to react (i.e., close possibilities for learning) or (2) to choose to observe and take effective, coordinated action (i.e., open possibilities for learning). The question then arises, when "something happens in our world," what stops us from being an observer, able to choose to take effective, coordinated action, to learn, versus being reactive and ineffective in our actions? How can we turn learning breakdowns into learning opportunities? To address these questions, we explore three linguistic distinctions that focus on how we take action in the world: the commitments in our speaking and *listening*; language and observation; and our Self-Narratives.

We describe *Linguistic Coaching®* as a conversation that allows the *Linguistic Coach* and *learner* to examine how the underlying commitments in our speaking and *listening*, our Speech Acts (i.e., promises, offers, requests, and assertions) close or open possibilities for learning and effective, coordinated action. By observing the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves (i.e., our Public and Private Self-Narratives), the *Linguistic Coach* and *learner* begin to see how the language we use (our underlying, largely unrecognized, interpretations, assumptions, beliefs, and expectations) determines our thoughts, feelings, and sensations, and the subsequent action we take, and not the other way around.

Moreover, we show how the reactive, automatic, and dependent relationship between our Public and Private Self-Narratives traps us in a Vicious Circle Self-Narrative where we make ungrounded versus grounded assessments of our own competence. Coupled with our own individual barriers to learning, the Vicious Circle Self-Narrative prevents us from seeing ourselves as *learners*, able and capable of developing competence to handle our self-identified Domains of Life Concerns. In contrast, the Learner Self-Narrative presents a new domain of action, one in which we see ourselves as *learners,* whole, able and complete, just the way we are and just the way we are not; able and capable of developing competence in our self-identified Domains of Life Concerns. In a context of mutual learning, mutual trust, and mutual respect, the *Linguistic Coach* acts as a mirror reflecting back to *learner*s that they are capable and able to develop competence in self-identified Domains of Life Concerns. With the support of the *Linguistic Coach*, *learners* move through Levels of Learning Competence in their self-identified Domains of Life Concerns, experiencing that they have the capacity to make choices, and be personally responsible for their own learning process.

By working in partnership with *learners* to establish an *ecology* for learning, the *Linguistic Coach* moves away from being a disciplinarian or behavior change manager to someone who empowers *learners* to be actively engaged in their own learning process. Through *Dialogues for Action*, the *Linguistic Coach* works in partnership with *learners* to prevent learning breakdowns and turn learning breakdowns into opportunities for mutual learning and effective, coordinated action. To engage *learners* in an effective

dialogue process, the *Linguistic Coach* shifts his or her own ontology from one that closes possibilities for learning to one that opens possibilities for learning. *Learners* are then empowered to "take charge" of their own learning process, opening possibilities for them to act effectively in the world as competent, caring, and contributing members of society.

Working in Partnership with Learners of All Ages and All Abilities to Empower Them to Take Charge of Their Own Learning Process

Taking Charge

The *Taking Charge* approach emphasizes working in partnership with *learners* of all ages and all abilities to assist them to identify areas of life concerns; develop competencies and strategies to handle those concerns; and learn to follow through with effective, coordinated action that is conducive to the well-being of the *learner* as well as others. Through *Linguistic Coaching*, *learners* are empowered to "take charge" of their own learning process, opening possibilities for them to act effectively in the world as competent, caring, and contributing members of society.

Linguistic Coaching

Linguistic Coaching is a conversation in situations of shared activity that allows the speaker and *listener* to work in partnership as *observers*. *Linguistic Coaching* is embedded in the everyday conversations we have with other people that allow us to *listen* to what is said and what is not said by *learners*, others, and ourselves; derive meaning; and take action in the world.

In a *Linguistic Coaching* conversation, *listening* constitutes more than the commonplace definition of the word. For example, "active listening" is a communication system used in counseling, training, and conflict resolution. It requires the *listener* to fully concentrate, understand, respond and then remember what is being said. "Reflective listening" is where the *listener* repeats back to the speaker what they have just heard to confirm the understanding by both parties. In contrast, in *Linguistic Coaching, listening* refers to our pervasive, fundamental, underlying interpretations, our largely unrecognized assumptions, beliefs, and expectations that determine our thoughts, feelings, and sensations and the subsequent action we take. We have obtained these largely unrecognized interpretations through our biology, family, ethnicity, gender role, gender identity, life experiences, educational background, religious upbringing, etc. We *listen* to ourselves and others out of our largely unrecognized interpretations, our assumptions, beliefs, and expectations. It is little understood that our underlying, largely unrecognized, interpretations both close and open possibilities for taking effective, coordinated action.

Listening also refers to the underlying commitments in the speaking and *listening* of ourselves and others. Taking effective, coordinated action in the world is directly related to our ability to *listen* to, that is analyze, the underlying patterns of commitments in Speech Acts (i.e., requests, offers, promises, assertions) of ourselves and others. Consequently, the role of the *Linguistic Coach* differs from that of a typical coach or even a teacher, mentor, counselor, or therapist in that the focus is on *listening* to the underlying, largely unrecognized interpretations and the underlying commitments in speaking and *listening* that form the basis for the conversations we have with *learners*, others, and ourselves.

Listening to our underlying, largely unrecognized interpretations is not really difficult. Our assumptions, beliefs, and expectations of ourselves and others show up in our Self-Narratives, the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, others and the world. By *listening* to *learners*' (and our own) Self-Narratives, we can discover whether or not, their (or our own) underlying interpretations close or open possibilities for learners, or ourselves, to take effective, coordinated action. Through a process of mutual learning, mutual trust and mutual respect, the *Linguistic Coach* can empower *learners* to observe the commitments in their own speaking and *listening* and the commitments in the speaking and *listening* of others.

Linguistic Coaching empowers the *Linguistic Coach* and *learners* to work in partnership as *observers* to:

- operate as if external to the sets of assumptions, beliefs, and expectations (i.e., underlying interpretations) and circumstances in which they find themselves;
- make clear (explicit) the sets of assumptions, beliefs, and expectations (i.e., underlying interpretations) that have been unclear (implicit) in the language that the speaker and *listener* use;
- observe the commitments in the speaking and *listening* of themselves and others; and coordinate effective action (i.e., learn).

Something Happens in Our/My World

A basic premise of the *Taking Charge* approach is that it is not an event itself, but it is our interpretation of the event that closes or opens possibilities for learning and effective, coordinated action to occur. Our assumptions, beliefs, and expectations all stem from our underlying interpretations of ourselves, others and our world. This linguistic distinction is not new. Born a slave, Epictetus (AD 135), a Greek-speaking Stoic philosopher, taught that "*Not things, but opinions about things, trouble men…in the power of choice alone we may achieve peace of mind."* Simply put, when something happens in our world, there are two possibilities: (1) to react (i.e., close possibilities for learning); or (2) to choose to observe and take effective, coordinated action (i.e., open possibilities for learning).

In a *Linguistic Coaching* conversation, we can begin to distinguish whether our response to "something happening in our world" is reactive versus observation leading to effective, coordinated action that allows us to learn. In a *Linguistic Coaching* conversation, we can also choose to turn our *reaction* to "something happening" into a positive learning opportunity.

"Something happening in our world" can be a routine event (such as brushing our teeth in the mornings) or something unexpected (such as getting into a car accident in a parking lot). However, it may not be obvious that becoming an observer of both routine and unexpected events in our lives can either close or open possibilities for learning to occur. Observing how we routinely brush our teeth in the morning can lead to more effective teeth brushing. On the other hand, having the electric toothbrush unexpectedly stop working may be an excuse to get upset or become a problem-solving opportunity (i.e., deciding to temporarily use a manual toothbrush). Likewise, getting into an unexpected car accident in a parking lot may lead to a yelling match (even if we are only yelling at ourselves) or teach us to drive more slowly or look more carefully before backing up the car.

Unfortunately, the term "reactive" has not only developed a negative connotation, it takes us away from observing that we can choose to turn our reactions into learning opportunities. Therefore, making the distinction between learning (i.e., coordinated action) and learning breakdowns (i.e., action that is not coordinated, therefore reactive) is useful. Viewing learning breakdowns as opportunities for learning to occur is a critical linguistic distinction, an actual choice that we can make. Consequently, a learning breakdown is not something to be characterized as inherently positive or negative or something to be avoided. In fact, the Ancient Greek translation for the word *crisis* means turning point, a sudden change for the worse or for the better. Similarly, something happening in our world can become a learning breakdown or a learning opportunity.

Learning Breakdowns

Learning breakdowns are breaks in effective, coordinated action; not "dancing" with oneself or others. How we talk about the world, our Self-Narratives, emerge in reoccurring patterns of learning breakdowns and the resultant feedback from another speaker or *listener*. Engaging in a *Linguistic Coaching* conversation as *observers*, the *Linguistic Coach* and *learner* can identify the source of the learning breakdown and the subsequent Speech Acts or courses of action that will allow the *Linguistic Coach* and *learner* to act effectively in resolving the learning breakdown (see *Dialogues for Action* below). Our contention is that learning breakdowns actually facilitate the learning process and serve various functions in that regard.

Observing the Relationship among Self-Narratives, Learning, and Effective Action. Firstly, a learning breakdown is an opportunity to become a better observer of our underlying, largely unrecognized, interpretations, our assumptions, beliefs and expectations, that show up in our Self-Narratives. In fact, during reoccurring learning breakdowns, the *Linguistic Coach* and the *learner* begin to observe the pervasive, automatic, and ongoing conversations we have about ourselves and our world in which we make grounded or ungrounded assessments about our competence and the competence of others in our self-identified Domains of Life Concerns. We can actually observe the relationship between our Self-Narratives and the effectiveness of the action we take in the world and discover that our Self-Narratives are the basis for future effective, coordinated action. In that way, a *learner's* Self-Narratives have a direct relationship to whether or not learning possibilities are closed or opened for the *learner*.

Observing the Commitments in Speaking and Listening. Secondly, during a learning breakdown, the *Linguistic Coach* and *learner* engage in a *Linguistic Coaching* conversation that enables them to discover the commitments (or lack of commitments) in their own speaking and *listening* (i.e., promises, offers, requests, assertions) and the speaking and *listening* of others. *Learners* often have the uncanny ability to discern whether or not someone is genuine and authentic in their speaking and *listening*. A *Linguistic Coaching* conversation allows the *Linguistic Coach* and *learners* to clarify the commitments in their speaking and *listening* and, thus, a mutual learning opportunity is created.

Identifying Divergent Assumptions. Thirdly, during a *Linguistic Coaching* conversation, the *Linguistic Coach* and *learner* have an opportunity to identify the divergent assumptions present in the speaker's and *listener*'s underlying, largely unrecognized, interpretations that can be the source of learning

breakdowns. These may include broken promises, thwarted intentions, undelivered communications, unfulfilled expectations, etc. Whether or not a promise was made and broken; an intention was misunderstood; a communication was withheld out of frustration or some other concern; or an expectation was or was not realistic, by engaging in a *Linguistic Coaching* conversation, the *Linguistic Coach* and *learner* can come to a mutual Agreement concerning future promises, intentions, communication, and expectations. Thus, out of learning breakdowns, mutual learning and effective, coordinated action can occur.

Gaining Competence in Self- Identified Domains of Life Concerns. Lastly, learning breakdowns are actually necessary for gaining competence in areas of self-identified life concerns. For example, when we take the time to observe how we brush our teeth, it can be considered a break in something that we have previously learned to do, or a learning breakdown. However, it is also a necessary step in gaining competence in teeth-brushing or learning to brush our teeth more effectively (i.e., observing that we brush horizontally when we should be brushing up and down). Similarly, it may be that the only time we recognize we need to drive more slowly in a parking lot is when we get into a car accident. Although the accident itself can be assessed as a negative, there is also a positive outcome…the opportunity to learn (once and for all) to drive more slowly in a parking lot; or the opportunity to gain competence in driving safely.

The question then arises, when "something happens in our world," what stops us from being an observer, able to choose to take effective, coordinated action, to learn versus being reactive and ineffective in our actions? How can we turn learning breakdowns into learning opportunities? To address these questions, we will explore three linguistic distinctions that focus on how we take action in the world: the commitments in our speaking and *listening*; language and observation; and our Self-Narratives.

Commitments in Speaking and *Listening:* Speech Acts

Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) formalized the analysis of language as meaningful acts by speakers and *listeners* in situations of shared activity. The essential importance of this analysis is to increase our ability to "*listen*" to the patterns of commitments in Speech Acts (i.e., assertions, offers, requests, and promises) entered into by speakers and *listeners* when they take part in a conversation. *Listening* constitutes more than the commonplace definition of the word. *Listening* in this context refers to our pervasive and fundamental, underlying, largely unrecognized interpretations, our Self-Narratives, that presuppose some kind of social interaction. It is the basic orientation that allows us to *listen* to what is spoken and what is not spoken and derive meaning. It is out of our *listening* to ourselves and others that we generate future action.

The analysis by Austin and Searle makes clear the underlying assumptions, beliefs, and expectations (i.e., interpretations) and the possibilities for what the speaker can do with an utterance. *Assertions* commit the speaker (in varying degrees) to something being the case – to the truth of the expressed proposition. One type of assertion is an assessment of our own competence which can be grounded or ungrounded (see the discussion of the Vicious Circle Self- Narrative below). *Offers* commit the speaker

to carry out some linguistic or non-linguistic act. An offer may be in the form of a question, *"Can I help?"* or a declaration, as in, *"I'll help you!"* Learning to distinguish the commitment in someone's offer is a powerful tool for forwarding effective action (i.e., *"Let's meet for dinner sometime."* versus *"Let's meet for dinner tomorrow night at 6:00 p.m. at Burger King."*). *Requests* are attempts to get the *listener* to do something, to carry out some linguistic act. *"Do you know where my pencil is?"* may also be a request for help. Likewise, *"I need a new pencil!"* sounds like a demand but could also be rephrased to determine whether or not a request is being made, as in *"Are you asking for a new pencil?"* Many people lack experience making requests, particularly in regard to their concerns in life. Our requests are often masked by complaints, demands, arguments, accusations, or even temper tantrums. In those cases, it is often helpful to ask, *"Do you have a request of me, or of someone else?" Promises* commit the speaker to some future course of action. A promise can be a simple statement, as in, *"I'll be there."* Promises are also implied, *"As a teacher, I am promising, whether or not I have stated it formally, to be prepared to assist you as a student to learn."* A particular type of promise is called an Agreement. *Agreements* are mutually-determined promises (assumptions and expectations) that govern a conversation. Agreements differ from rules imposed by one person on another. Rather, both the speaker and *listener* participate in the creation of an Agreement.

Language, Observation, and Action

A basic premise of the *Taking Charge* approach is that the language we use (i.e., our interpretations) determines our thoughts, feelings, sensations, and the subsequent action we take, not the other way around. For example, one person may describe the sensation he experiences in his body during and after riding a roller coaster as thrilling, another as scary, and still another as nauseating. Similarly, we often assume that as human beings we struggle to put our thoughts into words so that we can express our "true feelings." We fail to recognize that in making the linguistic distinction that a particular sensation is thrilling versus scary or nauseating, we are actually *languaging* that thought, sensation and accompanying feeling into being. We are not arguing that people do not have a right to interpret their experience of riding a roller coaster in any way that they want. Rather, we are pointing out the relationship between the linguistic distinctions we use and the subsequent thoughts, sensations and feelings that we have.

Another way of looking at it is to think of our eyes using the image of a camera. From "inside our heads" we look out at the world and take pictures of the world that we see outside our bodies. We assume that it is our eyes that give us information, which influences our subsequent thoughts, feelings, and sensations. However, in *Taking Charge*, we contend that our eyes actually function as projectors. Our eyes derive meaning from the world through interpretation. It is language that actually allows us to determine that we are looking at a tree versus a flagpole. It is through a linguistic distinction that we determine whether someone is smiling at us or scowling at us. Thus, in this scenario, our eyes are only as acute or effective as is our ability to interpret our world though linguistic distinctions. We might even say that we "see" through our ears, not through our eyes.

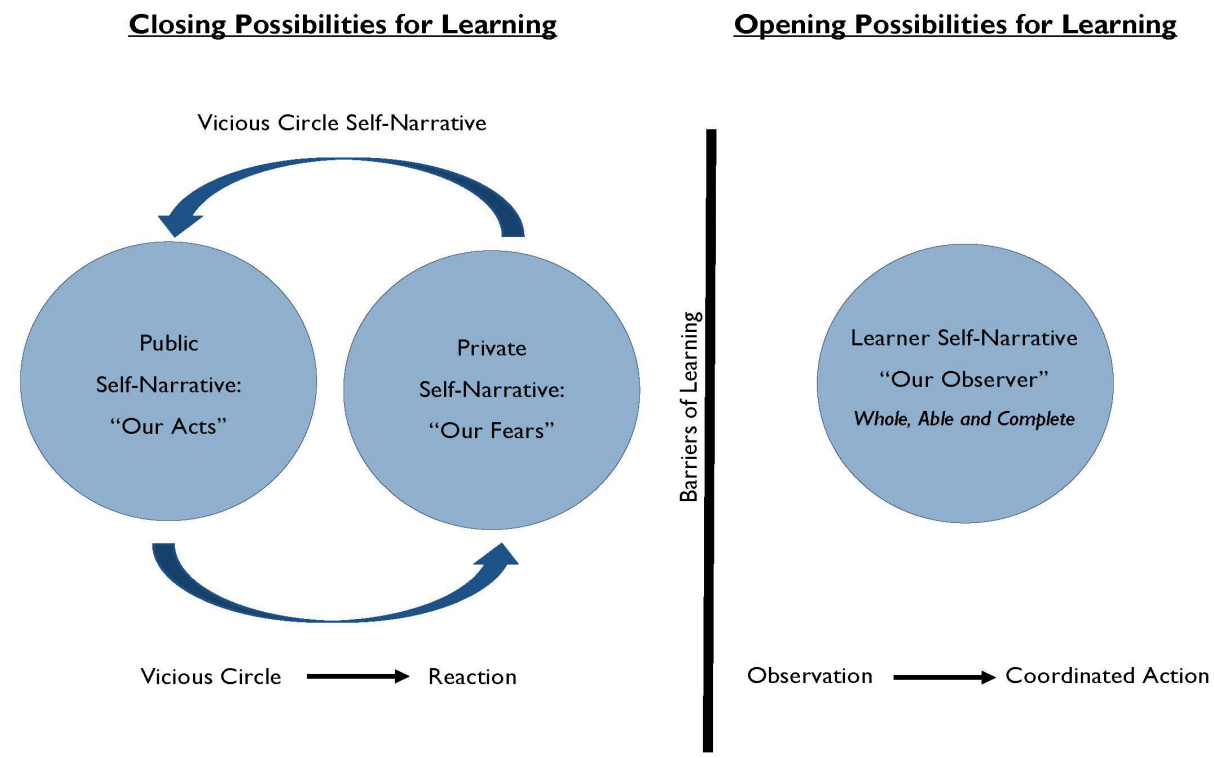
A common example of the relationship between our underlying, largely unrecognized interpretations and what we "see" in the world is that of the Inuit, who supposedly have over a hundred words, or

linguistic distinctions, to describe various types of snow. Their survival depends upon their ability to recognize and interpret a wide range of snow conditions. In contrast, someone born and raised in Southern California might struggle to name even a few words to use for different snow conditions (i.e., sleet, icy, slushy, powder). Even if he or she were standing beside an Inuit, "seeing" the same snow conditions, we may wonder whether someone from Southern California could actually "see" the same thing that someone raised in the Arctic "sees." Again, we would argue that our underlying, largely unrecognized interpretations, or the linguistic distinctions that we make, determine the nature of our thoughts, feelings, and sensations, and the subsequent action that we take. Clearly, someone from Southern California will have a different interpretation about the snow conditions in the Arctic and take different action based on those linguistic distinctions than someone born and raised in the Arctic. As we gain the ability to operate as an observer, external to our underlying, largely unrecognized interpretations, we open new possibilities for effective, coordinated action.

Domains of Being: Our Self-Narratives and Action

We have found it useful to describe three domains of being out of which we take action in the world. These domains are our Public Self-Narrative, what we present to the world; our Private Self-Narrative, who we are afraid we are; and our Learner Self-Narrative, who we really are (see Diagram A below). We distinguish these domains as a way to assist the *Linguistic Coach* and *learners* in observing the multidimensional underlying interpretations that they make about themselves and others. Also, by framing these domains as linguistic distinctions, we allow for the exploration of a different set of possibilities for future action, one that moves us away from being managers of others' behavior, or disciplinarians, or even counselors, to being partners that work together to observe our own and others' Self-Narratives, which close or open or possibilities for future effective, coordinated action.

Diagram A: Three Domains of Being—Our Self-Narratives and Action



Our Public Self-Narratives

The first domain, our Public Self-Narratives, is essentially "what we present to the world." It can also be characterized as our "act", our personality, or our public identity. Observing the actions that an individual presents to the world is an opportunity to observe the story that each person tells about oneself; one's Self-Narrative. In our Public Self-Narrative, actions might show up as "*I am cool, tough, strong, a victim, a bully, a "good" kid, a nerd, "popular," the class clown, a know-it-all, etc."* For the most part, we are unaware that we are making any particular linguistic statement with our actions. Our actions in this domain are automatic and reactive. Obviously, an assessment of our Public Self-Narrative can be considered positive or negative. Being "a strong person" may be considered a positive. Being a "bully" is almost always considered a negative. When one person makes a negative assessment about another person's Public Self-Narrative, that Public Self-Narrative might be characterized as a "behavior problem."

Labeling these negative assessments as *behaviors*, however, masks the linguistic nature of action. Seen as behaviors, parents or professionals go about trying to change or modify the behavior problem. Our

approach is to recognize that a linguistic distinction is being made about that individual's underlying, largely unrecognized interpretations, their assumptions, beliefs, and expectations about themselves, that show up in their Self-Narratives, that both closes and opens possibilities for learning and future effective, coordinated action.

We see two important limitations in viewing action as behavior rather than as a language. First, focusing on behavior either ignores the relationship between our underlying, largely unrecognized interpretations and the subsequent action we take, or relegates language entirely to a mental phenomenon, as in such approaches as cognitive behavior modification. From our point of view, language is a biological phenomenon (Maturana & Varela, 1992). Language is not isolated to the mind and the speaking and *listening* apparatus. As biological entities, we are born into a world of language. You might say that language lives in our bodies, not in our minds. Modifications to our underlying, largely unrecognized, interpretations also require modifications of our bodies. We operate in a complex interplay with our environment and with others that can be likened to a linguistic "dance". Thus, the very notion of trying to modify someone's behavior becomes antithetical to our approach. Rather, we advocate an ecological approach to learning, which is described below (see Creating an Ecology for Learning).

The second difficulty lies in the notion that changing someone's "act," or their Public Self-Narrative that is presented to the world, will effectively change someone's behavior. For all of us, our "acts" are only a cover for who we are afraid we are. Changing our Public Self-Narrative may not change the private underlying, largely unrecognized, interpretations we have of ourselves, our Private Self-Narrative.

Our Private Self-Narratives

While it may be easy to recognize the fear in a timid, anxious, withdrawn individual, it is not always readily apparent that the hostile, belligerent "bully" is also covering up the fear of who they are afraid they are. In our Private Self-Narratives, the fear about who we are afraid we are shows up in linguistic statements such as, *"I am unloved; weird; stupid; weak; unattractive; undeserving; hopeless; a failure; unworthy; unlovable, etc."* However, for most individuals, these fears remain a private, unrecognized, and unvoiced Self-Narrative. When these linguistic statements are voiced, we may assess the individual as a "victim" or in need of some type of treatment designed to alleviate their fears. As parents, caregivers, or professionals, we may also feel helpless in the face of their obvious despair or suffering.

However, the critical point is to recognize the automatic, "reactive," and dependent relationship between our Private Self-Narratives and our Public Self-Narratives. The primary function and purpose of our "acts," our Public Self-Narratives, is to manipulate, dominate, and control others in order to defend and protect our Private Self-Narratives. It is a fundamental human condition that we are accustomed to carefully guarding and concealing our Private Self-Narratives from others. Most of us are afraid that if people find out about who we are afraid we are, we will be totally alone and unable to survive. Thus, it is our fears about who we are afraid we are that threaten our very survival. Survival as used in this sense is not just the fear of being exposed and vulnerable, or the physical fear of being hurt or abandoned. Rather, we have found that the fear that holds our Private Self-Narratives in place comes from a much

deeper level and is linked directly to our fear of dying. Thus, whether we characterize someone's Public Self-Narrative as positive (e.g., *"a strong person")* or as negative (e.g., "*a bully"*), we all rely on our Public Self-Narratives to protect our Private Self-Narratives. It is no wonder that this automatic, reactive, and dependent relationship between our acts and our fears, our Public and Private Self-Narratives, has been called the Vicious Circle. It is also little wonder that parents and professionals express frustration in trying to change the behavior of difficult or distressed children or adults, not to mention the behavior of so-called "normal" children or adults.

The Vicious Circle Self-Narrative

We have already established that the relationship between our Public Self-Narrative and our Private Self-Narrative is automatic, reactive, and dependent. However, we also assert that the automatic and reactive nature of this dependency produces learning breakdowns. Afraid of being seen as weak, the *"bully"* picks on others. Thus, the *"bully"* produces learning breakdowns for themselves and others. When we find ourselves in reoccurring patterns of learning breakdowns, we say that we are caught in a "Vicious Circle."

A basic premise of the *Taking Charge* approach is what holds the Vicious Circle in place are the individual's Self-Narratives, typically ungrounded Self-Narratives, the Vicious Circle Self-Narrative, that close possibilities for learning. Again, Self-Narratives are the pervasive, automatic, and ongoing conversations we have about ourselves, others, and the world that closes or opens possibilities for effective, coordinated action. Thus, we all invent ourselves through language and we take action in the world consistent with our own assessment of our Level of Learning Competence in taking effective, coordinated action to handle our self-identified Domains of Life Concerns.

Much like the notion of "selective attention" in psychology, our Self-Narratives arise out of our selective *listening.* In fact, recent studies have shown that this selective *listening* process begins *in utero*. That is, babies *listen* and learn while in the womb consistent with the sound of their mother's voice, the language she speaks and the movements she makes (Moon, Lagercrantz, Kuhl, 2013). Thus, we are born into the world as language beings. As we age from infants onwards, we selectively *listen* to and assess our world consistently with our own underlying, largely unrecognized interpretations, our own Self-Narratives. It is in this way that we invent ourselves through language. As an example, suppose we were to draw a horizontal timeline with all the events of our lives arranged as dots corresponding to the specific times in our lives that these events occurred. And suppose we mark those events that we assess as "positive" above the horizontal timeline and those events that we assess as "negative" below the horizontal timeline. We might be surprised to find that we have created consistent stories about ourselves and others, our Self-Narratives, our own underlying, largely unrecognized interpretations of ourselves, others, and our world. Perhaps we have filtered out more "positive" events in our lives than "negative" events, or vice versa. Maybe we have created stories about ourselves, our Self-Narratives, which close rather than open possibilities for learning. Whichever way our "stories" are skewed, the result is that our assessments of our own competence and the competence of others arise automatically rather than through observation. While selective *listening* allows us to filter the myriad of

interpretations that we can make, and that we hear made, each day, it is clear that our "*listening"* filters can either close or open possibilities for learning to occur.

Consequently, it is important to distinguish between *learners'* "ungrounded" and "grounded" assessments of themselves. Often, when individuals speak about themselves, individuals repeat the "stories" they have invented about themselves, or that other people have said about them, for which there is no substantiating evidence of past actions to uphold the characterization (i.e., *"I'm stupid.").* We would then say that the individual has an "ungrounded" self-assessment. On the other hand, an individual whose self-assessment is *"I am a truant"* and whose record reflects a long string of being truant would be said to have a "grounded" self-assessment. As an individual gains the ability to make grounded versus ungrounded assessments about competence in domains of concern, the individual moves out of the Vicious Circle Self-Narrative and into a new domain of possibility.

Essentially, the individual's fundamental Vicious Circle Self-Narrative is: "***I am my thoughts, feelings, and sensations*.**" That is, the individual does not step outside their circumstances to observe "something happening in his or her world." The individual is unable to observe his or her own underlying interpretations, their largely unrecognized assumptions, beliefs, and expectations. Rather, the individual is reactive, makes ungrounded assessments about their learning competence, and does not recognize the possibility that learning can occur. Thus, an individual's Vicious Circle Self-Narrative includes such linguistic statements as: *"Who's to blame? It's not my fault. He/she did it. What's wrong with me? Why am I such a failure/loser? How can I lose? How can I win? How can I prove I'm right? How can I prove someone else is wrong? How can I be in control, dominate, manipulate, defend, and protect myself? Why are they picking on me? Why don't they understand me? No one is listening to me. Why bother? I don't care. No one cares about me. Nothing will change. Nothing is possible. How can I survive?"*

The metaphor of the Vicious Circle Self-Narrative is useful in looking even deeper into the pervasiveness and permanence of the mood of despair and resignation we often observe in individuals in distress and even in ourselves when we are trapped in the Vicious Circle. Since most of us have been taught that learning is about the accumulation of information, we do not see ourselves as *learners*, capable of learning how to learn, and capable of developing competence in our self-identified Domains of Life Concerns, new domains of action, that can move us out of the Vicious Circle. Thus, we feel helpless and hopeless in the face of the Vicious Circle. The Vicious Circle Self-Narrative is our coping mechanism for dealing with our fears in a world in which we assess ourselves as not competent and have little hope of becoming competent. Competence has to do with our ability to take care of our own concerns and the concerns of others. We are now beginning to see the extent to which the mood of despair and resignation in the Vicious Circle is directly linked to whether or not our Self-Narratives close or open possibilities for effective, coordinated action.

The *Taking Charge* approach advocates a conversation between the *Linguistic Coach* and the individual in distress that enables us to observe whether or not our Self-Narratives are ungrounded or grounded, whether they close or open possibilities for learning and effective, coordinated action. However, the purpose of a *Linguistic Coaching* conversation is not to judge any particular Self-Narrative as good or bad. Nor is *Linguistic Coaching* an attempt to "change" someone's Self-Narrative. Rather, the purpose of

a *Linguistic Coaching* conversation is to establish a context for mutual learning leading to mutually agreed upon effective, coordinated action. Importantly, the role of the *Linguistic Coach* is to assist the individual in distress to recognize that, despite whatever barriers to learning that he or she has experienced, there is the possibility that the individual can develop competence in self-identified Domains of Life Concerns.

Barriers to Learning

A barrier is a linguistic distinction in which the individual's Self-Narratives, or underlying, largely unrecognized interpretations of themselves, others and their world, serve as a barricade to an individual observing him or herself as a *learner*. Although "labels" can open possibilities, such as providing needed services or resources, often labels such as *"at-risk; special needs; delinquent; gang member; assaultive behavior; substance abuse; parental abuse and neglect; learning disabilities; school or job failure; family dysfunction, etc."* close possibilities for an individual to see him or herself as a *learner* capable of developing competence in self-identified Domains of Life Concerns.

The *Taking Charge* approach advocates that no matter how devastating an individual's past experiences and actions have been, it is our interpretation of the event, our Self-Narratives about ourselves and the world around us that closes or opens possibilities for learning and effective, coordinated action to occur. Simply put, when something happens in our world, there are two possibilities: (1) to react (i.e., close possibilities for learning) or (2) to choose to observe and take effective, coordinated action, to learn (i.e., open possibilities for learning).

That is not to say that abuse, violence, or exploitation by one person against another person should be ignored, condoned, or allowed to continue. And we agree that there should be natural or legal consequences for offensive, assaultive, or illegal behavior. However, we also are suggesting that observing the Self-Narratives that allow some individuals to operate outside the Vicious Circle in which they find themselves, and to rise above the barriers to their own learning process, is a fundamental tenet of the *Taking Charge* approach.

The notion of resilience, that some people are able to turn problems into opportunities, is not unfamiliar to us. Moreover, from our own experience we know that wanting to do something and actually doing it are two different things. That is what makes Rebecca's story about overcoming her own barriers to learning so remarkable. Rebecca was only 12 years old when her mother experienced a drug overdose and died in her arms while Rebecca was waiting for help to arrive after calling 911. After going to live with her grandmother, Rebecca entered a difficult adolescent period, complete with aggressive, assaultive behavior; drug abuse; an unwanted pregnancy; school truancy and failure; and previously undiagnosed learning disabilities. However, at least a decade after graduating from the Almansor Academy, a school for students with learning challenges, Rebecca returned to report that she had completed her Master of Science in Nursing while raising her daughter as a single parent.

There were significant barriers to learning that could have and, perhaps, should have blocked Rebecca from continuing her education: learning disabilities; a traumatic childhood and adolescence; lack of time or money; lack of physical energy; family responsibilities; etc. Any one of these barriers to learning

would have been sufficient to discourage Rebecca from going on to college and completing her Master's degree. Yet, we all know "resilient" individuals, like Rebecca, who struggle just as much as we do to balance work and family and other significant challenges who do manage to juggle all the barriers to learning in their lives and still return to school. It might take them several years, but they persevere and do what is required until they receive their license or degree.

The critical question is: *What is the relationship between an individual's Self-Narratives, resilience, and achievement in school and in life* (Quillen, 2017)? While there is no simple answer, it is important to note that when Rebecca returned to the Almansor Academy to report that she had earned her Master's degree, she also related that during the three or four years she was at the Almansor Academy working with a *Linguistic Coach*, she discovered that she was not "stupid" like she initially thought she was, and that she loved learning. She remembered being shown the three Domains of Being diagram and asking her *Linguistic Coach*, *"Why didn't you tell me this before?"* She was 16 years old at the time. We would say that Rebecca had observed a new possibility for herself outside the Vicious Circle in which she was trapped. She observed herself as who she really was, the *learner*. And her subsequent Self-Narrative and action as a *learner* reflected a new possibility for effective, coordinated action.

Another important point to make about why some resilient individuals overcome barriers to learning while others do not has to do with the notion that without the support of another observer, or *Linguistic Coach*, we may remain unaware or oblivious to the fact that our Self-Narratives have trapped us in a Vicious Circle, making it impossible for us to overcome our barriers to learning. While being caught in the Vicious Circle Self-Narrative may be unproductive or even painful, it is familiar, even comfortable, for most of us. Much like Brer Rabbit in the briar patch who said, *"If it hurts, it must be home,"* the Vicious Circle is what we have come to expect; it confirms our Self-Narratives, our underlying, largely unrecognized, interpretations about ourselves, others, and our world; and therefore, we accept our world as it is and we do not even bother to look to see if another possibility exists. Even if we see that there is another possibility for us, we do not believe that we are capable of learning and developing the competencies we need to handle our self-identified Domains of Life Concerns and move out of the Vicious Circle. Here is where *Linguistic Coaching,* a conversation with another *observer*, can help us step outside the circumstances in which we find ourselves to see new possibilities for effective, coordinated action.

However, to see a new opportunity for effective, coordinated action in a new and unknown domain (i.e., our Learner Self-Narrative) is to expose oneself to possible risk or failure. To take the risk to move into the unknown requires *trust* – *trust* in oneself and *trust* in others. *Trust* in which the individual takes a stand that there is a new possibility for learning, even though there is no proof that such a possibility exists. This stand is a tall order when we are caught in the Vicious Circle Self-Narrative. While the role of the *Linguistic Coach* is to work in partnership with the *learner* to open the possibility that a new domain exists, a domain in which learning can occur, to accomplish this, mutual learning, mutual trust and mutual respect are necessary.

Trust includes two linguistic distinctions that need to be examined to determine whether someone is trustworthy or not: *competence* and *sincerity* (Flores, F. & Graves, M., 1986). *Competence* is a

conversation in which an *observer* is able to assess an individual's actions in domains of concern as effective or ineffective, and/or to recognize that an individual can consistently deliver certain standards of performance in a particular domain of action. *Sincerity* is a conversation in which the *observer* recognizes that an individual's actions are consistent with his words, that the individual keeps his word and/or that the individual acknowledges and cleans up mistakes.

Respect also includes two linguistic distinctions that need to be examined to determine whether someone is worthy of respect: *competence* and *value*. We have described the linguistic distinction of *competence. Value* is a conversation in which the *observer* assesses that the standards of performance in a particular domain of action are worthwhile and important to the coordinated action in which he or she is engaged.

Often, we collapse linguistic distinctions in our conversations about *trust* and *respect*. An individual in distress may go to his best friend for advice rather than to a *"competent"* professional because he *trusts* that his best friend is *sincere* and believes the *"competent"* professional is not. Likewise, an individual in distress may *respect* his friends because he believes that a particular action or performance they provide him is *valuable* (i.e., the friends give him a sense of belonging and security which his family is not able to do) and not *respect* a *"competent"* teacher because he or she does not *value* what the teacher has to offer (i.e., required attendance at school every day).

It is important to recognize that an individual in distress does not automatically *respect* or *trust* someone based on their roles, power, or authority (i.e., *"I am your parent; or I am the teacher; or I am your boss. I deserve to be respected and trusted."*). While we would agree that individuals in distress need to be polite and considerate of others, we would argue that the linguistic distinctions *"trust"* and *"respect"* need to be earned over *time* as a consequence of mutual observation and mutual learning leading to effective, coordinated action. Silva (2006) created a useful formula that provides a convenient summary of the relationship between *trust, respect*, *competence*, *sincerity*, *value*, and *time*:

$$\text{Trust} = \frac{(\textit{competence} + \textit{sincerity})}{\textit{time}} \qquad \text{Respect} = \frac{(\textit{competence} + \textit{value})}{\textit{time}}$$

Our Learner Self-Narrative

The *Taking Charge* point of view is that programs designed to change another person's behavior or alleviate their underlying fears are not necessarily sufficient to turn their life around. Rather, what is called for is to empower the individual in distress to observe a new possibility, a third domain of action, in which they can experience themselves as *learners* and *observers*, able to develop competencies to take care of their own concerns and the concerns of others. We call this new domain "who we really are," the Learner Self-Narrative, our *observer*. Learning to take action that addresses our self-identified concerns in life represents a real possibility for breaking out of the Vicious Circle and naturally shifts our Self-Narratives from one that closes possibilities for learning to one that opens possibilities for learning and effective, coordinated action. Viewing oneself as a *learner* is not something that needs to be taught.

We are all innate *learners* and *observers*. And we all experience barriers to seeing ourselves as *learners*, able to develop competence to handle our self-identified Domains of Life Concerns.

Thus, the purpose of distinguishing three Domains of Being, or domains of action, is not to get rid of the "acts" that limit us by trying to change our behavior or our personalities; or to eliminate our underlying "fears"; or to even turn our negative Self-Narratives into positive Self-Narratives. Nor is the job of the *Linguistic Coach* to do away with the individual's Vicious Circle Self-Narrative or barriers to learning. Rather, the purpose of making these linguistic distinctions is to enable the *Linguistic Coach* to work in partnership with others to empower them to observe themselves as *learners* (i.e., *observers*), capable of opening new possibilities for learning and effective, coordinated action for themselves and others.

As *Linguistic Coaches*, we engage in conversations with *learners* in situations of shared activity that allows us to work in partnership as *observers*. In that regard, we observe the *learner* making linguistic statements that are in sharp contrast to the automatic, reactive and dependent stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, our Public and Private Self-Narratives, and the linguistic distinctions that characterize the statements we make about ourselves within the Vicious Circle Self-Narrative.

The fundamental Learner Self-Narrative is: "***I am a learner*, an *observer*. *I am whole, able and complete just the way I am and just the way I am not; I am a learner, able and capable of developing competence in my self-identified Domains of Life Concerns."*** The Learner Self-Narrative shows up in such linguistic statements as: *What am I assuming? What are others assuming? What are my promises, requests, offers, assertions? What are others' promises, requests, offers, assertions? What am I responsible for? What are others responsible for? What have I observed? What have others observed? Is my Self-Narrative about myself and others grounded or ungrounded? Am I completing my tasks, following directions, showing consideration for others, etc.? What are the Agreements? What are my (positive) choices? How can I work in partnership with others? What is possible? What works? What doesn't work? What are my concerns? What are other people's concerns? What steps do I need to take to learn (i.e., develop competence in my self-identified Domains of Life Concerns)? How do I learn best (e.g., visually, orally, by touch, using assistive technology, etc.)? I'm just learning how to learn.*

While it might be argued that very few people can be self-reflective about their own learning possibilities, our experience over the years has shown that not to be the case. After discovering she could write a whole paragraph on her own (despite poor spelling), a 12-year-old girl exclaimed, *"I'm just learning how to learn!"* A three-year old asked her *Linguistic Coach*: *"I get frustrated. What should I do?"* An eight-year-old, when explaining why he liked the Almansor Academy better than his old school said, *"The teacher didn't know me."* When asked, *"Do you mean the teacher didn't know your name?" "No,"* he said, pointing to his heart, *"The teacher didn't know who I really was."*

The question then arises, how can the *Linguistic Coach* support the *learner* to choose to take effective, coordinated action; how can the *learner* be empowered to take personal responsibility for his or her own learning process? To begin to address these questions, we will examine four linguistic distinctions: the *learner* as whole, able and complete; Self-Narrative, self-esteem, and action; personal responsibility; and choice.

Whole, Able and Complete

A basic premise of the *Taking Charge* approach is that there is in each one of us an innate *learner*: the *observer*. In this context, our capacity to learn is not a function of our intellectual, physical, biological, cultural, familial abilities or background, gender or age. Thus as a *learner*, we are whole, able, and complete just as we are and just as we are not. Any limitations are actually opportunities for learning to occur, enabling us to reach our full potential and act effectively in the world as competent, caring, and contributing members of society. The *Linguistic Coach* is a mirror, reflecting back to the *learner* who looks to us for confirmation that they are whole, able and complete just as they are and just as they are not. Thus, the fundamental job of the *Linguistic Coach* is to empower *learners* to see for themselves that they are, indeed, capable of learning and developing competencies to take effective, coordinated action in their self-identified Domains of Life Concerns. We have all had the experience of engaging in a conversation with someone (i.e., parent, friend, teacher, supervisor, aunt, or grandparent, etc.) who believes in us, who sees us as we really are or who points out something positive about ourselves that we did not previously recognize (e.g., *"You have a good memory for details."*). Their assessment of us opens possibilities for us to develop competence in new domains of action (e.g., *"I remember details. I can learn to play Junior Scrabble even though I am only eight years old.")*. Conversely, we all remember that person who made an assessment of us that we may have believed to be ungrounded, and that, even so, may have cut us to the core (e.g., *"You have poor eye-hand coordination."*). Even though we believed their assessment to be ungrounded, it can often close future possibilities for us to develop competence in new domains of action (e.g., *"Someone once told me I have poor eye-hand coordination. Guess I won't try out for the soccer team."*). Thus, the important role that the *Linguistic Coach* plays in empowering individuals to make grounded versus ungrounded assessments of themselves and to see themselves as *learners* and *observers*, capable of developing competence in self-identified Domains of Life Concerns cannot be overstated.

Self-Narrative, Self-Esteem, and Action

Often parents and professionals working with individuals in distress become burnt out due to the somewhat daunting notion that we must somehow build their self-esteem or teach distressed people new values or so that they are ready to learn or to work. Accordingly, using affirmations to build self-esteem is seen as a way of replacing negative thoughts with positive thoughts so that the distressed person gains a willingness to put forth effort. It is like the classic tale of the *Little Engine that Could* going up the hill puffing, *"I think I can. I think I can. I think I can!"*

However, repeating positive thoughts about ourselves is not always effective enough to bring forth effort and action. Nor is it a reliable tactic to assume that we can teach someone else to recognize the value of learning to read, for example, for their future success. Moreover, while no one would deny that praise and rewards are meaningful and can be motivating to most of us, in the end most parents and professionals discover that praise and rewards are only meaningful and motivating if the person themselves assesses that their efforts are noteworthy. In fact, time after time, people respond more favorably to a demanding teacher or boss with high expectations rather than one who is "nice" and allows them to produce sub-standard work.

In working with many *learners* over the years, it is increasingly evident that their Self-Narratives are a direct result of the action they take. In looking at the relationship between Self-Narrative, self-esteem, and action, it is obvious to us that talking about something, affirming our willingness to do or be something, even gaining insights into why we are or are not doing or being something, is not nearly as powerful as action itself. Moreover, in regard to the action that we take, such as reading aloud in class or undertaking a new assignment at work, our willingness to undertake the action is directly related to our Self-Narratives and assessment of ourselves as competent to the action (i.e., *"I am a good reader."* or "*I am a poor reader." "I am good at trying something new"* or *"I am poor at trying something new."*).

Consequently, a person's willingness to put forth effort has much to do with past experiences of success and failure, what he or she has said about himself or what others have said about him or her in the past, his or her Self-Narratives. In other words, our Self-Narratives close or open possibilities for future action.

The *Taking Charge* approach holds that an individual's Self-Narrative of him or herself as a *learner* is, in and of itself, the most powerful predictor of subsequent action. Most models see the necessity of a motivational component to later behavior:

Self-esteem (affirmations) > motivation > behaviors

In contrast, the *Taking Charge* model proposes a direct link between our Self-Narratives as *learners*, language, self-esteem, and action. Indeed, we create our self-esteem through the language we use to describe ourselves, our Self-Narratives; and perhaps more important to this discussion, language is action:

Self-Narrative = language = action = self-esteem

Our contention is that it is really not necessary to "teach" or motivate someone to be a *learner* and put forth effort in the traditional sense of how we link self-esteem, motivation and learning. In fact, one of the primary tenets of the *Taking Charge* approach is that we are all innate *learners* and we all face barriers, in certain domains of action, to the full realization of our learning potential. Thus, the *Taking Charge* approach is to create a new environment, an *ecology* for learning, in which opportunities are available so that each of us naturally re-discovers for ourselves that we are *learners* and *observers*, able to develop competencies in self-identified Domains of Life Concerns (see Creating an Ecology for Learning below).

Personal Responsibility

It is common for parents and professionals to lament, "*What is the world coming to? Young people take no responsibility for themselves and their world. How can we teach young people to be more responsible*?" It is also common for us to characterize other people (not usually ourselves) as irresponsible when they take some action or make some linguistic statement that we assess as "irresponsible." That this characterization of children (or other people) as being irresponsible has been a common assessment over many generations does not make people think it is any less true. In fact, a quote attributed to Socrates (470-399 BC) underscores the idea that adults do not consider children to

be as responsible as they themselves are: *"The children now love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are tyrants, not the servants of their household. They no longer rise when their elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers."* Indeed, Socrates might have simply said, *"Children are irresponsible."*

Without getting into a debate about whether or not this type of assessment about young people is grounded or ungrounded, or whether or not this quote attributed to Socrates is verifiable, it is quite apparent that our underlying, largely unrecognized assumptions, beliefs, and expectations that young or "other" people are not as "responsible" as we are has been an ongoing conversation among adults for hundreds, if not, thousands of years.

The *Taking Charge* approach defines "personal responsibility" somewhat differently than the common use of the term and relates personal responsibility directly to the learning process. The *Taking Charge* approach views "personal responsibility" as innate to all *learners*. Therefore, it is not necessary to teach someone to be personally responsible. Rather, the role of the *Linguistic Coach* is to empower *learners* to observe that they are already, and always have been, responsible for their own learning process. Personal responsibility in this context is assessed as the willingness to see oneself as the source of one's own learning successes and learning breakdowns in life. However, being "personally responsible" for one's own learning successes and learning breakdowns in life does not imply blame, guilt, or fault (i.e., "*It's my fault. It's the parents', teachers' or boss' fault."*). Rather, it is the willingness to examine the effectiveness of one's own Speech Acts in closing or opening possibilities for effective, coordinated action; the willingness to see oneself as a *learner* (*observer*), able to develop competence in handling self-identified Domains of Life Concerns.

In *Taking Charge*, personal responsibility also means being 100% responsible for our learning successes and learning breakdowns in life. It is common for us to say, *"I'll do my 50% if you do your 50%."* However, by taking 50% personal responsibility for our Speech Acts and actions, we should not be surprised when only 50% of the results we want are produced. On the other hand, if each one of us takes 100% personal responsibility for our Speech Acts and actions, we are taking 100% of the responsibility for producing the results we want. In the world of personal responsibility, there is no such thing as, *"It's the other guy's fault."* Rather, taking 100% personal responsibility means, *"You can count on me to look to see how my Speech Acts close and open possibilities for effective, coordinated action. And you can count on me to turn learning breakdowns into learning opportunities, 100% of the time."* However, to examine our learning successes and learning breakdowns in life, to see ourselves as *learners* and *observers* personally responsible for our own learning process, requires the support of another *observer*, the *Linguistic Coach* (see *Dialogues for Action* below).

Choice

The nature of choice has long been debated in philosophical and religious circles. Do any of us really have free choice or free will? What is often missing in these discussions is that it is our Self-Narratives,

our underlying, largely unrecognized interpretations, our assumptions, beliefs, expectations, that both close and open possibilities for us to make choices and act in the world effectively.

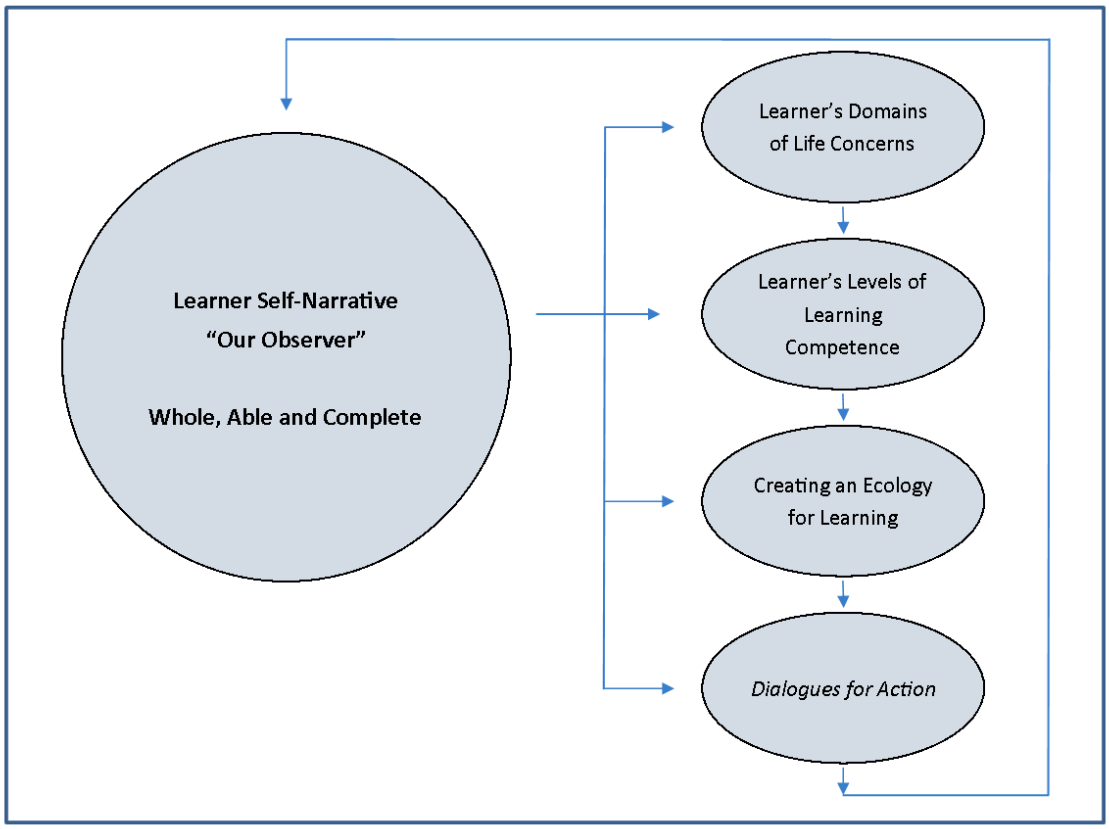
In working with individuals in distress, the role of "choice" in their education, family or job setting, or therapeutic process is particularly relevant (White, 2008). If our goal is to empower people to take charge of their own learning process, then their ability to choose to observe and take effective action in the world (opening possibilities for learning) versus react (closing possibilities for learning) is critical in enabling them (and us) to reach that goal. By choosing to observe and take effective action (open possibilities for learning), the *learner* has taken personal responsibility for his own learning process.

A basic tenet of the *Taking Charge* approach is to work in partnership with *learners* to empower them to make choices and take effective, coordinated action that is conducive to the well-being of the learner as well as others. To that end, *Taking Charge* defines choice as the privilege or opportunity of freely selecting alternatives of effective, coordinated action in a particular self-identified Domain of Life Concerns. "Structured Choice" is guidance of the *learner* by the *Linguistic Coach* based on the *learner's* demonstrated Level of Learning Competence in a particular domain of action (see Levels of Learning Competence and *Dialogues for Action* below).

In partnership with the *learner*, the *Linguistic Coach* creates an ecology for learning in which mutual learning, mutual trust, and mutual respect naturally lead to choice and personal responsibility (see Creating an Ecology for Learning below). As *learners* gain competence in making effective choices, the *learner* is empowered to "take charge" of his or her own learning process. The relationship among the *learner*'s Self-Narratives; the *learner's* self-identified Domains of Life Concerns; the *learner's* Levels of Learning Competence; Creating an Ecology for Learning; and *Dialogues for Action* is shown in the Diagram B below.

Diagram B

Learner Self-Narrative
Opening Possibilities for Learning



Learner's Self-Identified Domains of Life Concerns

A basic tenet of the *Taking Charge* approach is that all human beings have basic, fundamental concerns about various areas of their lives (Flores, F. & Graves, M, 1986). A *learner's* concerns show up as a blend of interest, uncertainty, and apprehension regarding the assessment of his or her own competence in a particular domain of action. A *learner* assesses him or herself as having or not having the requisite abilities, qualities, or skills to develop competence in a particular self-identified Domain of Life Concerns.

While our concerns may change over time, dealing effectively and competently with our concerns is naturally motivating. Conversely, when we believe ourselves to be incompetent to deal with our concerns, we may begin to despair and appear "unmotivated" to others. As *Linguistic Coaches*, we begin to *listen* to *learners* differently. When learning is structured around the concerns that each of us have, we are readily "self-motivated."

Following the work of Flores and Graves, we have identified eleven domains of concern among *learners*: body/health; activities/pastimes; social/relationships; family; work/career; school/education;

money/finances; the world; personal worth; coping/emotions; and spirituality. Our assumption is that these types of concerns form the backdrop upon which *learners* base their future actions. Most importantly, our assessment of ourselves as able or not able to develop competence to handle our self-identified Domains of Life Concerns closes or opens possibilities for future, effective coordinated action. The role of the *Linguistic Coach* is to assist the *learner* to identify Domains of Life Concerns and determine what steps might be taken to develop competence to handle those concerns.

Unfortunately, adults often fail to recognize the importance of structuring learning around the concerns that children have. Or, constrained by various educational or therapeutic requirements (e.g., all ninth graders must complete Algebra and World History; or school-based therapy cannot include family therapy, etc.), adults may be unable to creatively find ways to meet these requirements while structuring learning around the *learner's* concerns. The result is somewhat predictable for many students that we consider to be "unmotivated."

Paul was diagnosed on the Autism Spectrum at a very young age. At sixteen years old, Paul was a bright and gifted individual who characterized himself as a "poet savant." He made insightful observations about his diagnosis on the Autism Spectrum and wrote vivid poetry bemoaning how lonely he was and how much he wanted friends. Yet, the goals on his Individual Education Plan (IEP) did not reflect his poetry gift or his concern about not having friends. Instead, his IEP focused on his meeting his high school graduation requirements. Alarmingly, one of his IEP goals was to "remain in his seat for 20 minutes at a time." These goals may have reflected the concerns of his parents and his teachers, but certainly did not reflect the concerns that Paul had himself expressed in poem after poem he wrote about being lonely. Thus, not surprisingly, Paul rarely completed his academic work and frequently left class without permission, claiming he was bored. Paul was characterized by his teachers as "unmotivated" and by his counselors as having an "Oppositional Defiant Disorder". It might be argued that designing a learning program that would accommodate Paul's gift as a poet and his concern about not having friends (without negating his parents' or teachers' concerns) would be time-consuming and outside the scope of a typical educational setting. However, it is equally evident that even more time was spent trying to "motivate" Paul to complete his high school graduation requirements and "manage" Paul's behavior to prevent him from leaving class without permission. Therefore, the lesson for us as *Linguistic Coaches* is to ask ourselves, is the *learner* really unmotivated or, more importantly, what are the concerns that young people have and how we can we support them to develop competence to meet their concerns in life?

Learner's Levels of Learning Competence

Learning is an innate capacity within all human beings. A *learner* naturally moves through Levels of Learning Competence within a domain of concern (Flores, F. & Graves, M., 1986). For example, in a consensual domain with others, a baby usually, and quite spontaneously, learns to raise his head, roll over, sit, crawl, pull himself up, and then take a first step while learning to walk. However, at times, a *learner's* natural inclination to learn is blocked. There are barriers to learning. Sometimes these barriers are significant: physiological, nutritional, and nurturing differences. However, even with optimum learning conditions, each individual learns at his own rate and in his own way. There is really no one way

that learning occurs. What is common to all *learners*, however, is that we all move through Levels of Learning Competence within self-identified Domains of Life Concerns, and in doing so we are learning how to learn. Adapting the work of Flores and Graves, we have identified seven levels of competence from Discovery to *Master*y

Level I: *Discovery.* At this level, the *learner* is unaware of the learning opportunity; the *learner* is "asleep", non-observant in the domain of learning in which they find themselves. The *learner* produces learning breakdowns, which others recognize, even without the *learner* being aware of them. An example might be a student who walks into a classroom talking loudly, with hair disheveled, bumping into other students' desks, and dropping things on the way. Other students may react angrily and say that they are deliberately disrupting them and causing trouble. Like kittens learning to walk, they are awkward and have no control over their bodies. There are even times when no one really wants them around; and they make others miserable.

Whether or not the *learner* in *Discovery* is deliberately disruptive is not the key point. We would argue that this *learner* is not even aware of the learning opportunity that is available. Thus, the *learner* has no control over his actions or, rather, "reactions." They do not know that they are just discovering how to learn. They are still caught up in the Vicious Circle Self-Narrative between their acts and their fears. What is missing for the *learner* in *Discovery* is dignity and self-respect. Would an experienced kitten or cat act this way? Similarly, *learners* whose actions or Speech Acts generate an assessment where people say they are "deliberately disruptive" could be said to lack dignity and self-respect.

Key to Coordinating Action: *To create an ecology for learning that empowers the learner to act with dignity and self-respect.*

Level II: *Developing*. The *Developing learner* also produces learning breakdowns. In this case, the *Developing learner* is aware he or she is in a classroom and still acts the same way as they would outside on the playground. They are unaware of the learning opportunity. They refuse to accept the requests or directions of the *Linguistic Coach* or others in the classroom. While the *Developing* learner may be playing by their own rules, they are still unable to assess themselves as *learners* moving thorough Levels of Learning Competence within certain Domains of Life Concerns. In that sense, the *Developing learner* remains unaware and unable to make choices that lead to effective, coordinated action, such as being "appropriate in the classroom." What is missing for the *learner* who is *Developing* is trust. That is, the *learner* does not trust himself or others. A *learner* who is *Developing* requires evidence that keeping the Classroom Agreements, for example, will actually lead them to gain competence within their self-identified Domains of Life Concerns. Not only is the *Developing learner* unable to assess themselves as a *learner*, they are unable to trust that they can learn from others. For *learners* who have had repeated experiences of failure in school, family, or work situations, trust in teachers, family members, their boss, the *Linguistic Coach*, and others in positions of authority is likely to be minimal at best.

Key to Coordinating Action: *To create an ecology for learning that establishes mutual learning, mutual trust, and mutual respect.*

Level III: *Beginner.* The *Beginner* is completely aware of the distinction of a domain of action (e.g., "being appropriate in the classroom"). However, they are aware that they cannot perform effective actions in the domain and are willing to engage in dialogues with the *Linguistic Coach* (i.e., teacher) whom they accept as an authority in the classroom. Thus, the *Beginner* is willing to ask for help from the *Linguistic Coach* and wants to know how to develop competence in "being appropriate in the classroom." In this case, they are beginning to trust their own and someone else's competence. They are beginning to observe themselves as *learners* able to develop competence, such as participating in the development of, and following, the Classroom Agreements. What is missing for the *Beginner* is the ability to be a capable *observer* of their own actions as being effective or ineffective. When learning breakdowns do occur, it is important for the *Linguistic Coach* to observe the *learner* as a *Beginner* rather than as a troublemaker. This level of competence implies that dignity and self-respect as well as mutual trust and mutual respect are already part of the dance of learning how to learn, and thus, the *Linguistic Coach* and the *learner* are learning together.

Key to Coordinating Action: *To empower the learner to be an observer of his own learning process; to engage in a conversation (i.e., Dialogue for Action) with the learner to coordinate mutual learning and effective, coordinated action.*

Level IV: *Minimally Competent.* The *Minimally Competent learner* is someone who has begun to act effectively in the domain (i.e., appropriately in the classroom) and is usually accepting of the mutually agreed upon Agreements (i.e., the Classroom Agreements). Yet, the *Minimally Competent learner* does not yet trust himself to act independently. *Minimally Competent learners recognize* that they may produce big learning breakdowns if left to themselves and rely on the *Linguistic Coach*, or another *observer*, to provide them with cues or support to avoid learning breakdowns. For example, a *Minimally Competent learner* learning how to be "appropriate in the classroom" may know how to enter a classroom quietly and work on some assignments on his own, but not yet be able to work independently in some academic areas or in a group with others. They can ask for help or ask to be excused from an activity or task that they believe they will fail (e.g., *"I need help with math;"* or *"I need to work alone, not with the group."*). They can observe other *learners* as being effective and ineffective. They are able to assess their own effectiveness with the support of the *Linguistic Coach*. Yet, they still rely on directions and supervision from the *Linguistic Coach* who is available to answer questions and spot potential learning breakdowns as they are about to occur. They are able to engage in a *Linguistic Coaching* conversation (i.e., *Dialogues for Action*) to identify their concerns and the steps it will take to develop competence to handle their concerns. However, they are not yet ready to anticipate learning breakdowns and resolve them on their own.

Key to Coordinating Action: *To empower the learner to be an independent observer of their own concerns in a particular domain and the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of the action they take to develop competence in meeting those concerns; to empower the learner to anticipate learning breakdowns.*

Level V: *Competent.* The *Competent learner* is someone who can perform independently in the domain and can anticipate and deal with learning breakdowns on their own. For example, the C*ompetent*

learner can act effectively and appropriately in the classroom and anticipate learning breakdowns before they occur. Although they follow the Classroom Agreements, they do so in a seemingly natural and effortless way. They can assess their own competence as effective or ineffective. The *Linguistic Coach* and other students recognize that they perform well. An example is the *learner* who now handles both independent and group learning activities well and produces results that the *Linguistic Coach* (his parents and others) consider to be good results. They do not produce great learning breakdowns and deal effectively with whatever learning breakdowns confront them in a particular self-identified Domain of Life Concerns. However, being *Competent* in one domain of action does not preclude that the *learner* is not a learner in *Discovery*, or *Developing*, or a *Beginner,* or *Minimally Competent* in another domain.

Key to Coordinating Action: *To empower the learner to develop competence in other self-identified Domains of Life Concerns.*

Level VI: *Highly Competent.* A *Highly Competent learner* excels in a domain of action. They act without the need for the support of the *Linguistic Coach* in the deliberation of the action they take, rules, or instructions. They fully "dance" in the domain (i.e., being appropriate in the classroom). They perform whatever action is needed at the time it is needed to prevent learning breakdowns from happening or to respond successfully to the learning breakdowns that have occurred. The *Linguistic Coach*, other students, the *learner's* parents, and others recognize and admire their competence in that domain of action. The *Highly Competent learner* does more than just produce good results – they raise the standards that have been historically accepted in the domain. This is the *learner* who produces superior results in certain domains (i.e., being appropriate in the classroom; demonstrating computer expertise; taking care of younger children; speaking at Parent Night; growing plants; shooting baskets; writing poetry, etc.). They are the one who other *learners* look up to and seek to learn from. They may exhibit what others call their own learning style or action in the domain.

Key to Coordinating Action: *To provide the learner with the opportunity to coach others in the domain in which he or she excels.*

Level VII: *Mastery.* Finally, there is *Mastery,* a *learner* of "historical excellence." What sets this *learner* apart is that they participate in the very invention of the domain in which they act. This *learner* can produce radical innovations in the standard practices of the domain – the usual actions participants in the domain perform, in how they perform them, and in the results they produce. This *learner* is not just able to perform in the domain; he is able to make a revolution in the history of the domain. As an example, this would be the *learner* who steps out of their Vicious Circle Self-Narrative and overcomes significant barriers to learning, such as Rebecca (discussed above), to achieve a Master's Degree in Nursing and become a competent, caring, and contributing member of society. By the way, it was not necessary for Rebecca to obtain a graduate-level degree to demonstrate her learning competence at *Mastery* in this illustration of Levels of Learning Competence. Rebecca became a *master* when she chose to step out of her Vicious Circle Self-Narrative, go beyond her barriers to learning, take charge of her own learning process, and produce effective results (i.e., coordinated action).

Key to Coordinating Action: *To provide the learner with the opportunity to "invent" in new domains of action.*

Often, we tend to make global, ungrounded assessments and judgments about ourselves and others as *learners*: lazy, stupid, smart, apathetic, motivated, unmotivated, etc. However, these global, ungrounded assessments fail to take into account that all *learners* move through Levels of Learning Competence within certain domains, from *Discovery* to *Mastery*. Unfortunately, these global, ungrounded, and pervasive assessments, in and of themselves, become barriers to learning. As *Linguistic Coaches* and *learners*, it is important to recognize in which Level of Learning Competence we are operating for a particular domain of action so that we make choices that allow us to move into the next Level of Learning Competence, and, in turn, take personal responsibility for our own learning process.

Creating an Ecology for Learning

A *learning ecology* is the relationship among *learners*, the *Linguistic Coach*, and their environment that fosters effective, coordinated action. *Linguistic Coaching* is a conversation that helps us observe and restate the commitment structures in our linguistic acts and, therefore, coordinate action. As language beings, our interactions with each other and with our environment can be likened to a dance, that is, coordinated action. The juxtaposition of the poetic notion of dancing as compared to behavior management is striking and begins to set the stage for designing an *ecology* for learning that is in sharp contrast to the usual discussions about "changing behavior" or "discipline." Thus, creating an *ecology* for learning is not a structure set up to control *learners'* behaviors or enforce discipline or establish a set of rules. Rather, creating an *ecology* for learning is an opportunity to work in partnership with *learners* to build a mutually effective learning environment, to coordinate action.

Indeed, the deliberate use of the words *learning ecology* points to the importance of observing the coordinated action among *learners*, the *Linguistic Coach*, and their environment. Often observation of the learning environment is linear and unidirectional, such as when one observes different aspects of the "environment" as part of an effort to change a student's behavior. In contrast, the *Taking Charge* approach is to observe the linguistic distinctions that are part of the coordinated dance that makes up the *learning ecology* for the *Linguistic Coach* and for each *learner* and each group of *learners*: the *learners'* Self-Narratives, their various Domains of Life Concerns that make up their environment (e.g., body/health, school, family, world, etc.), and the *learners'* Levels of Learning Competence, etc. Importantly, the *Taking Charge* approach focuses on the commitments in the speaking and *listening* (i.e., Speech Acts) of the *Linguistic Coach* and the *learners* that form the basis for effective, coordinated action.

The importance of observation in creating an *ecology* for learning is seen in the following anecdote. In the primary class at the Almansor Academy, as in classrooms at all age levels, the children engage in a conversation with the teacher (e.g., the *Linguistic Coach*) at the beginning of each year to establish the Classroom Agreements. Unlike rules, these Agreements are jointly decided upon by the teachers and the students, with the sole purpose of creating coordinated action. Thus, one of the Agreements is that children can work together as partners at various times throughout the day (during academic tasks,

during lunch, during free choice time, etc.) as long as they "support" each other appropriately. On this occasion, eight-year-old Giovanni kept calling across the room, trying to get Alfred's attention. Alfred was sitting quietly at his desk working as "partners" with and "supporting" Scottie. He ignored Giovanni. Clearly, Alfred was keeping the Classroom Agreement about being "partners." Instead of telling Giovanni to be quiet or to stop calling out, the *Linguistic Coach* said to Giovanni, "Did you notice that Alfred didn't answer you? That's because he's partners with Scottie." Giovanni's look of anger and frustration changed to one of understanding and acceptance, and he quickly went back to his own assignment.

In this classroom, the Agreements are part of the *learning ecology* that supports the teacher (i.e., *Linguistic Coach*) in being able to observe children and engage in a conversation with them that opens opportunities for learning (i.e., observation) to occur. Giovanni's action (i.e., observing that Alfred was partners with Scottie; showing a look of understanding and acceptance on his face; and returning quickly to his own assignment) followed from the *Linguistic Coach's* observation that what was missing for Giovanni was the linguistic distinction about what it meant to be a "partner." Thus, the *Linguistic Coach's* role was not that of a disciplinarian or a behavioral change specialist, but rather as an *observer* "coordinating action" in partnership with Giovanni, another *observer*. By viewing Giovanni as at the "*Beginner*" Level of Learning Competence and as a potential *observer* rather than a "behavior problem," the *Linguistic Coach* was able to engage Giovanni in a brief "conversation" (one in which Giovanni responded with his body "language" rather than with words) that facilitated Giovanni's ability to observe and learn for himself. In the event that Giovanni was unable to return to his assignment, the *Linguistic Coach* would then engage in a further dialogue with Giovanni, beginning with an "Inquiry" such as "*Giovanni, are you OK?* or *Do you need support?* or *Do you have a request?*" (See *Dialogues for Action* below.)

In partnership with Giovanni, Albert, Scottie and, presumably, all the students, the *Linguistic Coach* had clearly established a *learning ecology* of mutual learning, mutual trust, and mutual respect. With the Classroom Agreements in place (i.e., coordinated action), the *Linguistic Coach* was able to observe Giovanni's concern (e.g., wanting Albert's attention) and his Level of Learning Competence (i.e., as a *Beginner*) and engage in a conversation with Giovanni that prevented a minor learning breakdown from escalating into a serious learning breakdown.

Creating an *ecology* for learning also recognizes the importance of observing the moods or underlying, largely unrecognized, interpretations (i.e., assumptions, beliefs, and expectations) that show up as the *learner's* unspoken Self-Narratives, that permeates the learning setting (i.e., a classroom, therapeutic milieu, job site, or wherever learning takes place). We have already observed that individuals in distress have often experienced histories of learning failure with resultant unspoken Self-Narratives or pervasive moods of despair and resignation (i.e., the Vicious Circle Self-Narrative). These pervasive moods of despair and resignation do not just live in *learners'* spoken and unspoken Self-Narratives but also in their bodies (e.g., withdrawn or aggressive acts; sleeping in class; self-destructive behaviors; sad, angry, hostile, or defiant demeanors; poor posture; poor personal hygiene, etc.). Rather than the *Linguistic Coach* trying to change the moods present in the *learners'* bodies, the *learning ecology* itself can be designed in such a way that a mood of anticipation for learning occurs. The premise is that our moods respond in different ways in different *learning ecologies.* Since our interpretations of

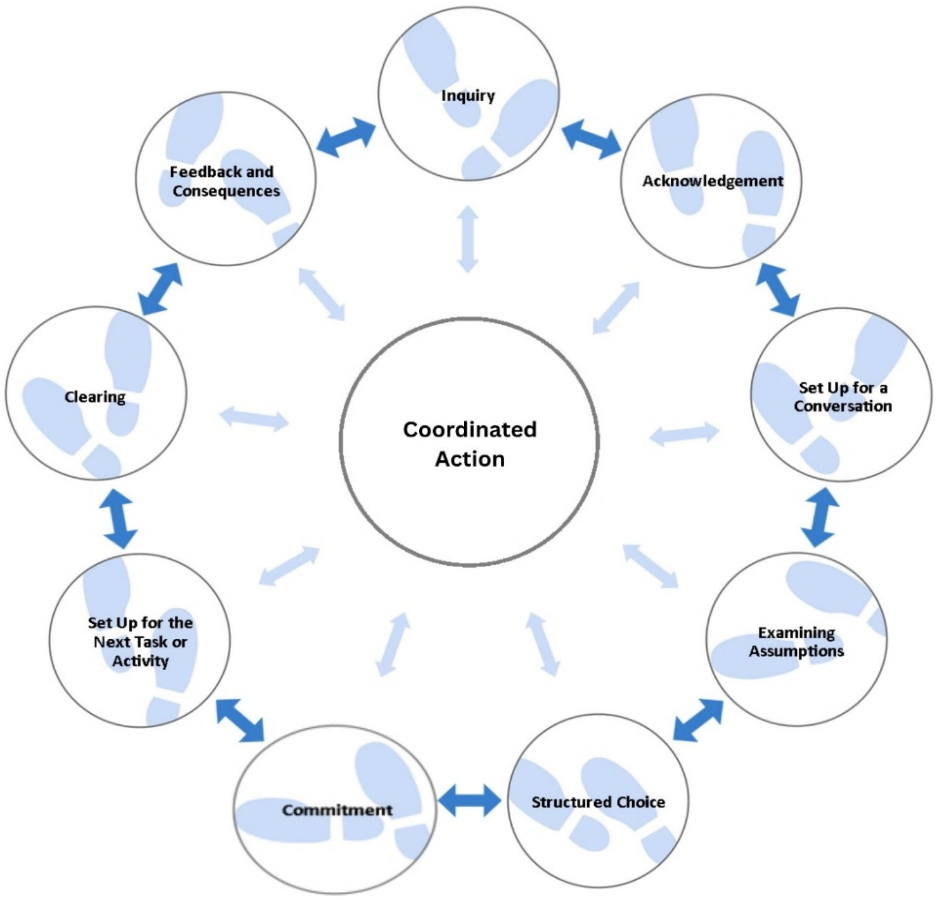
ourselves and others, our Self-Narratives, live in our bodies, shifting the *learning ecology* allows our bodies to interact in different ways and to experience different ways of observing ourselves and those around us. Importantly, one of the primary outcomes of creating an effective *learning ecology* is that *learners* are empowered to naturally shift the moods that live in their bodies, their Self-Narratives, from ones that close learning possibilities to ones that open learning possibilities.

The *Linguistic Coach's* guiding principle for designing the *learning ecology* is whether or not it closes or opens possibilities for *learners* to see themselves as *learners*, able to make choices and take personal responsibility for their own learning processes. Consequently, it is critical for the *Linguistic Coach* to observe the impact of a multitude of environmental elements on closing or opening possibilities for learning for each *learner* and group of *learners*: sound; music; lighting; color; humor/laughter; indoor versus outdoor learning activities; the organization and arrangement of the room, seating, and materials; scheduling and/or the creation of a Daily Assignment Sheet (Hernandez, 2017); timing; direction-giving; housekeeping; the establishment of mutual Agreements; purposeful movement; collaborative learning; innovative methods and materials; the match between the *learner's* individual learning style and the curriculum; the use of assistive technology, etc. In turn, by working in partnership with l*earners* to create an effective *learning ecology*, the *Linguistic Coach* will experience him/herself as a facilitator of learning rather than as a disciplinarian or behavior management specialist. A thorough description of how to establish an effective *Ecology* for Learning can be found in *Taking Charge® for Educators and Related Professionals: Linguistic Coaching® for Learners of All Ages and All Abilities* (Lavelle, 2003, 2026).

Dialogues for Action

A *Dialogue for Action* dialogue is the minimal unit of conversation in which an interplay of assertions, offers, requests, and promises are directed toward effective, coordinated action. In the *Dialogues for Action* process, as in any *Linguistic Coaching* conversation, we are not just speaking and *listening*. Rather, we are engaging in a dialogue with the intention of examining the underlying, largely unrecognized interpretations, our assumptions, beliefs, and expectations, and the underlying commitments in the speaking and *listening* of ourselves and others. Through experience, we have identified nine *Dialogues for Action* that provide a guide for engaging individuals in distress in the dialogue process: Inquiry; Acknowledgement; Setting Up for a Conversation; Examining Assumptions; Structured Choice; Commitment; Setting Up for the Next Task/Activity; Clearing; and Feedback and Consequences (see Diagram C below).

Diagram C: *Dialogues for Action*—The "Dance"



Linguistic Coaching and the *Dialogues for Action* process presuppose an *observer,* the *Linguistic Coach*, who empowers *learners* to be *observers* themselves. An *observer* is someone who makes linguistic distinctions and is able to operate as if external to the circumstances in which they find themselves. The ability to observe our underlying, largely unrecognized, interpretations and the underlying commitments in our speaking and *listening* is not always readily apparent. That is why engaging in both the *Linguistic Coaching* conversation and the *Dialogues for Action* process is called a "dance," and is not simply a detailed procedure to be followed.

Throughout the discussion above, we have spoken repeatedly about opening possibilities for the *Linguistic Coach* and *learners* to observe and take effective, coordinated action, to learn. Learning breakdowns are a break in effective, coordinated action. We have already noted that our Self-Narratives emerge in reoccurring patterns of learning breakdowns and the resultant feedback from another speaker or *listener*, the *Linguistic Coach*. When we find ourselves in reoccurring patterns of learning breakdowns, we say that we are caught in a "Vicious Circle." Engaging in the *Dialogues for Action* process as *observers*, the *Linguistic Coach* and *learner* can identify the source of the learning breakdown

and the subsequent Speech Acts or courses of action that will allow the *Linguistic Coach* and individual in distress to move out of the Vicious Circle, act effectively in resolving the learning breakdown and, thereby, coordinate action.

While we have also asserted that learning breakdowns actually facilitate the learning process, there is no doubt that learning breakdowns can "throw" us back into our Vicious Circle Self-Narrative, the automatic, reactive, and dependent relationship between our Public Self-Narrative and Private-Self Narrative. Remember that the purpose of the Public Self-Narrative is to manipulate, dominate, and control others in order to defend and protect our Private Self-Narrative. Since the Public Self-Narrative covers up our fear of who we are afraid we are, when we experience a learning breakdown that "throws" us back into the Vicious Circle Self-Narrative, our very survival is threatened. While most learning breakdowns are a result of seemingly minor miscommunications (e.g., broken promises, unfulfilled expectations, thwarted intentions, undelivered communications, etc.), when we are caught in the Vicious Circle, a minor miscommunication can easily lead to a learning breakdown that is not only intense but aggressive and violent. Consequently, learning breakdowns can range from mild breaks in ongoing action to more serious learning breakdowns that require a more intensive intervention to resolve the learning breakdown and to provide for the safety of the *learner*, the *Linguistic Coach*, and others (Penafiel, M., 2016). However, whether the learning breakdown is minor or more serious, over the years we have discovered that engaging in the *Dialogues for Action* process with *learners* is the most effective way to not only prevent learning breakdowns from becoming serious, but also turn serious learning breakdowns into learning opportunities.

The importance of recognizing that both the *Linguistic Coaching* conversation and the *Dialogues for Action* process is a "dance" and not a procedure to be followed is shown in the following anecdote about a learning breakdown apparently triggered by undelivered communications. When fourteen-year-old Arturo got mad, he would yell at or push someone to get his way, and then run out of the classroom without permission. One time, his *Linguistic Coach* found him on the porch, overlooking the preschool playground, looking angry and miserable with a big scowl on his face. Clearly, Arturo had experienced a learning breakdown that "threw" him back into his Vicious Circle Self-Narrative of despair and hopelessness. His *Linguistic Coach* asked Arturo, *"Are you all right?"* but Arturo refused to speak. His *Linguistic Coach* noticed that Arturo was watching two preschoolers who were both pulling on the same toy. Soon one preschooler began to push the other one who began crying and pushing back. Finally, hearing both children crying, the preschool teacher came over to investigate. The *Linguistic Coach* asked Arturo, "*Did you notice that neither one of those preschoolers used words to say what they wanted?"* Arturo didn't answer. The *Linguistic Coach* continued, *"You know, when children are young, people don't expect them to use words, and pushing and crying to get what they want is considered fairly normal. However, as children get older, people expect them to use words to tell when they are worried or angry about something. In fact, when older children push, it becomes very serious because they can really hurt someone. I bet people have those same expectations of you."* By this time, Arturo's face had begun to soften, his posture relaxed, and the scowl was leaving his face. *"The funny thing is,"* continued the *Linguistic Coach*, *"when we get angry, that's the hardest time to use words. I bet you get disappointed in yourself and that's why you leave the room without permission."* Arturo looked up at his *Linguistic Coach*

and nodded. *"Do you want to figure out a way to say what you want to say without getting mad?"* asked his *Linguistic Coach*. *"Yeah,"* said Arturo, *"I do."*

The *Dialogues for Action* linguistic "dance" with Arturo began with an Inquiry *("Are you all right?"*) rather than an accusation that focused on the fact that Arturo may have yelled at or pushed someone and had left the classroom without permission. In this way a context of care and concern was demonstrated, setting the stage for establishing mutual trust and mutual respect (i.e., Set Up for a Conversation). Observing Arturo watching the preschoolers, the *Linguistic Coach* used the opportunity that was presented to her to engage Arturo as another *observer* (i.e., at a *Beginner* Level of Learning Competence) to observe what was happening between the two preschoolers on the playground (i.e., *"Did you notice that…?"*). In doing so, Arturo naturally left his Vicious Circle Self-Narrative and was a *learner*, an *observer*, once again. During her dialogue with Arturo, his *Linguistic Coach* recognized one of Arturo's concerns as genuine and valid (i.e., *"I bet you get disappointed in yourself…?"*; Acknowledgment), confirmed by Arturo looking up at her and nodding. As the *Linguistic Coach* described what was happening on the preschool playground, she was actually "reframing" for Arturo what may have happened when Arturo was in the classroom (i.e., Examining Assumptions). When the *Linguistic Coach* asked Arturo, *"Do you want to figure out a way to say what you want to say…?"* Arturo was finally able to speak up, saying *"Yeah. I do"* (i.e., Commitment). Although Arturo said very few words in the "dialogue" process, the *Linguistic Coach* observed that Arturo was engaged in the dialogue when she saw Arturo's face and body posture relax. As a result, Arturo demonstrated that he was now ready to continue the dialogue, to further examine what had happened in the classroom (i.e., Examining Assumptions) and complete the dialogue process (i.e., Structured Choice; Commitment; Set Up for the Next Activity or Task; Clearing; Feedback and Consequences).

It is important to note that in most circumstances, comparing an adolescent's actions with those of preschoolers would escalate the learning breakdown. In this case, the *Linguistic Coach* clearly demonstrated to Arturo through her tone of voice, body language, and the words that she used (i.e., the linguistic distinctions she made) that Arturo was a *learner* (and *observer*), whole, able and complete, just as he was and just as he was not (see the discussion of Ontological Design below). Moreover, the *Linguistic Coach's* observations about the preschoolers while on the playground created a new *learning ecology* that naturally shifted Arturo's pervasive mood of despair and resignation (i.e., the scowl on his face, his tense posture, and his refusal to speak), opening the possibility that Arturo and the *Linguistic Coach* could work in partnership as *observers* to forward effective, coordinated action.

Whether *learners* engage in the *Dialogues for Action* process verbally or non-verbally through their body language, we have found that *Dialogues for Action* are a key tool for assisting *learners* to identify Domains of Life Concerns (either immediate or long-term); make grounded versus ungrounded assessments of their own Levels of Learning Competence in meeting those concerns; observe the underlying source(s) of learning breakdowns to turn learning breakdowns into learning opportunities; make appropriate choices; and take effective, coordinated action. Within this context, *Dialogues for Action* is an opportunity for *learners* to make choices and take personal responsibility for their own learning process.

The *Dialogues for Action* Chart below provides a summary of the purpose and potential Speech Acts for each type of dialogue: Inquiry; Commitment; Clearing, etc. However, presenting a *Dialogues for Action* "chart" masks the fact that engaging in the dialogue process is truly a "dance," not a prescriptive system to be followed. More importantly, where the *Linguistic Coach* is "coming from" is of equal if not greater importance than where the dialogue process is going (i.e., towards effective, coordinated action). As a result, the key to engaging another person in an effective dialogue process is the *Linguistic Coach* being able to shift their own *ontology* from one that closes possibilities for learning to one that opens possibilities for learning. A detailed description of the *Dialogues for Action* process can be found in *Taking Charge® for Educators and Related Professionals: Linguistic Coaching® for Learners of all Ages and All Abilities* (Lavelle, 2003, 2026).

Chart A
Dialogues for Action

Dialogue	Purpose	Speech Acts (offers, requests, assertions, promises)
Inquiry	Creating a context of care and concern, not blame. Setting the stage to examine the underlying assumptions/commitment in speaking and listening.	Requesting/Offering: Are you OK? How are you? Do you need support? Do you have a request?
Acknowledgement	Recognizing the learner's concern as genuine and valid.	Asserting/Requesting: Sounds like you're upset? Are you concerned about_____?
Set-Up for Conversation	Establishing a context of mutual trust, respect.	Requesting/Offering: Are you ready to talk? When you can talk to me politely, then we can talk.
Examining Assumptions	Establishing a context of mutual learning: examining concerns, assumptions, reframing, setting limits, shifting the mood by using humor, etc.	Requesting: Did you notice that ____? Have you thought about ____? What is another way to handle that?
Structured Choice	Empowering the learner to participate in the selection of alternative courses of action and consequences; empowering the learner to make effective choices.	Requesting/Offering: What are the agreements? When ____Then ____. You may ____ or ____, which do you choose to do?
Commitment	Creating mutual agreements about future action.	Asserting/Promising: You have chosen _____; will that work for you? What can you count on yourself to do? Can you keep your word? What is our agreement (repeat for clarity, understanding)?
Set-Up for the Next Task Activity	Investigating the unforeseen and unknowable that will cause the agreement to be broken.	Requesting: What is the same thing happens again? What will you do or say if ____? Are you willing to keep your word if ____ happens?
Clearing	Establishing that the learning breakdown is complete and the learner is ready to move on to the next task/activity.	Asserting/Requesting: You have chosen ____ (repeat agreement or choice). When you finish your choice, then you can ____. Are you ready to get started?
Feedback and Consequences	Assisting the learner to evaluate the effectiveness of his or her actions.	Offering/Requesting/Asserting: You have demonstrated competence in (recovering; making an effective choice; making/keeping your agreement, etc.). As a result, you may (earn your point for recovery; participate in a preferred activity, etc.). Do you have any feedback for me? Do you have any feedback about how you think you are demonstrating competence in ____?

Ontological Design

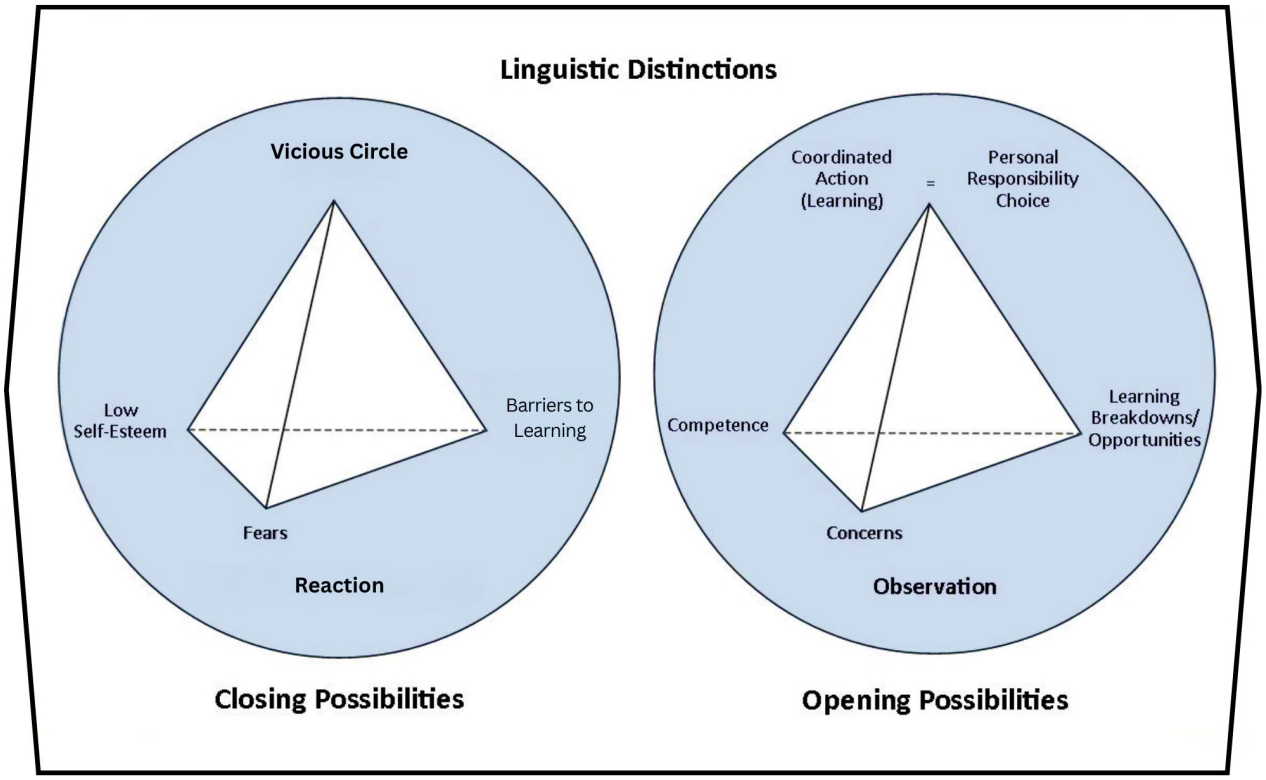
Using *Taking Charge* in schools and organizations for over 50 years, we have found that empowering *learners* to observe themselves as *learners*, capable of opening new possibilities for learning and effective, coordinated action actually requires the *Linguistic Coach* to reframe or shift their own underlying, largely unrecognized interpretations about themselves and others, particularly individuals in distress. Much like the fish in the fish bowl, we are not able to observe that we are in water. That is, we are unable to observe that we already have preconceived assumptions about what it means to be in the world, what it means to be a person in distress, a *learner*, a teacher, a student, a therapist, a parent, a caregiver, a mentor, a worker, a counselor, etc. And we often fail to recognize that these preconceived interpretations, our assumptions, beliefs, and expectations, can actually interfere with our ability to view ourselves and other people as *learners* and *observers*, capable of opening new possibilities for learning and taking effective, coordinated action for ourselves and others. We are unable to observe that *learners* have the capacity to make choices and be personally responsible for their own learning process. Most importantly, often our own acts and our own fears react to the other person's acts and fears, and we are both caught in the same Vicious Circle.

The reframing or shift required for us to step outside the fish bowl, to step outside the Vicious Circle, in which we find ourselves is called ontological design. Whether we are aware of it or not, our basic assumptions about being in the world (i.e., our ontology) evolves out of our concerns about essential questions regarding the nature of reality, time, space, truth, human nature, human activity, human relationships, the nature of the relationship between humans and the environment, etc. *Ontological design* is a conversation in which the speakers and *listeners* make explicit linguistic distinctions regarding their nature of being in the world.

Imagine a conversation in which we recognize that when something happens in our world, there are two possibilities: to react (i.e., close possibilities for learning), or to choose to observe and take effective, coordinated action (i.e., open possibilities for learning). In this conversation, we describe a *learner's* fears as the concerns that all humans have about developing competence in domains of action. As *learners* naturally move through Levels of Learning Competence in particular self-identified Domains of Life Concerns, we speak of learning breakdowns and learning opportunities rather than the Vicious Circle and barriers to learning. Instead of having conversations about improving a *learner's* low self-esteem, we recognize that self-esteem is a function of demonstrating competence to handle one's own self-identified Domains of Life Concerns (and the concerns of others). As *learners* demonstrate competence in their self-identified Domains of Life Concerns, *learnersr* can be said to be making choices and taking personal responsibility for effective, coordinated action (i.e., observation and learning). Now imagine that we have unintentionally built a stable structure with a strong foundation, a tetrahedron, which holds in place the discourse that closes possibilities for learning. Rather than futilely trying to change or modify the old discourse, we have invented a new discourse, a new ontology, one which speaks of *learners* as whole, able and complete just the way they are and just the way they are not; able and capable of developing competence in their self-identified Domains of Life Concerns. Our new tetrahedron is also stable with a strong foundation, impervious to the ups and downs of life, allowing us to transform our discourse from one that closes possibilities for learning to one that opens possibilities

for learning success. It is within this new ontology that the *Linguistic Coach* and *learners* can engage in conversations and dialogues as *observers* and as *learners*, capable of opening new possibilities for effective, coordinated action for themselves and others (Lavelle, N., 2003, 2026; Woolfson, L., 2003).

Diagram D: Shifting Our Ontology from Closing to Opening Possibilities



Conclusion

Taking Charge, *Linguistic Coaching*, and *Dialogues for Action* provide powerful tools for working in partnership with *learners* of all ages and all abilities to empower them to "take charge" of their own learning process. We understand that our approach is a new way of thinking, a new ontology, that may appear complicated at first. However, as with any new approach, practice makes perfect! We also invite you to register for our online courses available on our website; or, for further information, contact us at www.TakingCharge.com. Thank you for your commitment to opening possibilities for *learners* of all ages and all abilities to act effectively in the world as competent, caring, and contributing members of society.

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