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About this blog



photo courtesy of [International School of Billund](#)

Hello and welcome to the official blog of the Pedagogy of Play research project! In 2014, some folks from the [LEGO Foundation](#) and [Project Zero](#), a research organization at the [Harvard Graduate School of Education](#), began thinking together about learning through play. What is the role of play in empowering children to be lifelong learners? In helping them develop critical and creative thinking skills? What does school-based playful learning and teaching look and feel like? How can a culture of playful learning be cultivated and sustained in schools?

The [Pedagogy of Play \(PoP\) project](#) officially took shape in 2015 with a playful participatory research project based at the [International School of Billund \(ISB\)](#), Denmark. With a mission and vision founded on the belief that play is a core resource for how children learn, ISB was fertile ground for exploring our questions. This co-created research inspired a working set of playful learning principles,



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practices, and tools and the inspiration for an evolving pedagogy of play framework.

Yet we know that playful learning is shaped by culture and context – that is, what play looks and feels like in one place is likely not the same in another. So we have begun to explore other contexts of playful learning: how learning through play might be similar or different to what emerged from ISB and what a cross-cultural pedagogy of play might look like. In 2017 we began investigating our core research questions with three schools in the Johannesburg and Pretoria regions of South Africa. In 2019, we started work with six schools in the Boston area, USA. We hope to continue this exploration in other settings as we move forward with our research.

As we dive deeper into playful learning and teaching, we find ourselves thinking deeply about everything from the relationship between play and democracy to playful dispositions (for learners and teachers). We will share thoughts, questions, and stories from the classroom, and we will feature guest bloggers along the way.

We hope this blog provides a mental playground for tinkering with ideas and building a community of playful thinkers and thoughtful players.



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January 31, 2019

What we believe about learning through play in schools



photo courtesy of International School of Billund

Play and playfulness have caught the attention of educators around the world. Play and playfulness in schools?! As we struggle to prepare students for a quickly changing world filled with uncertainty, the risk-taking, imagining, inventing and learning from mistakes that learning through play fosters are essential dispositions that schools must promote. The Pedagogy of Play (PoP) project offers guidance and inspiration for educators asking the question: how can we bring more play and playfulness into our classrooms and schools? We are working on a framework that supports teachers and school leaders in creating cultures where playful learning thrives. We launch our *popatplay* blog by sharing six core beliefs about playful learning in schools:



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1. **Play is a core resource for learning.** When people play they are engaged, relaxed, and challenged—states of mind highly conducive to learning. Through play, children and adults try out ideas, test theories, experiment with symbol systems, explore social relations, take risks, and reimagine the world. They develop agency, empathy, and their imaginations. They learn to deal with uncertainty. While not all learning has to be playful, nor does every moment of playfulness involve significant learning, a close look at play and playfulness reveals numerous emotional, social, and cognitive features that can powerfully abet learning. Sometimes these features help to make learning feel fun and enjoyable; sometimes they help learning proceed in more engaging and exploratory ways.

2. **Learning through play *in schools* involves play with a purpose.** Schools are places where young people come to learn the important skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed to be contributing members of their communities. While we are big supporters of unstructured, child-directed “free-play,” a pedagogy of play *in schools* involves play with a purpose, bringing together educators’ learning goals and students’ natural ways of learning through play. Playful learning situates curricular goals, content, and activities within a larger purpose of helping learners understand, explore, and shape their world.

3. **The paradoxes between play and school complicate bringing playful learning and teaching together.** Bringing



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play and school together is not easy or straightforward because of the paradoxical relationship between play and school. For example, play is timeless...players lose themselves in play. School, on the other hand, is timetabled. Play can be chaotic, messy, and loud; schools aspire to be places of order. In play children are in charge, while at school the agenda is generally set by adults. Play involves risks, whereas in school we aim to keep children safe. Why are these paradoxes? Because both sides of these statements are true: we want children to explore and experiment **and** we don't want them to get hurt. Creating a culture of playful learning requires inquiry-oriented teaching, and ongoing conversations among a school faculty to navigate these paradoxes.

4. **Learning through play is a mindset with playfulness as the active ingredient.**

Learning through play involves students and teachers approaching learning with a playful mindset. Beyond integrating a game or activity into a lesson, embracing a pedagogy of play means activating mindsets where learners and teachers frame and reframe experiences as occasions to be curious, creative, and imaginative, and to find joy in exploring the “what if...” space of learning and play. While games and activities can help encourage these mindsets, learning through play requires more than isolated curricular moves. Playfulness and having a playful disposition (for learner and teacher) are active ingredients for learning through play.



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5. **Play and playfulness thrive in supportive school cultures.** Playful learning is rarely a solo endeavor. The ability to learn through play thrives in supportive school cultures for students and teachers. While small steps can be taken to bring more playful learning to a classroom, sustained change depends on developing a school culture of *trust* among children and adults. While there are various entry points to begin developing a culture where playful learning thrives, a pedagogy of play involves rethinking the relationships between teachers and students and a re-evaluation of what learning comprises. In addition, a culture of playful learning for children requires a culture of playful learning for adults. In such schools educators are supported in taking risks, trying out ideas, and tinkering with their practice. With a playful approach to their practice, educators engage in responsible experimentation.

6. **Learning through play is universal and shaped by culture.** People around the world play and have the ability to learn from that play. At the same time, play is a cultural construct. Whom children play with, how they play, where and when they play, and what age they should stop playing (if ever!) are determined by cultural contexts. The form and content of playful learning therefore varies depending on the context.

That's it for our first post. If you are curious about these ideas, stay with us! In future posts the PoP team will dive deeper into some of these beliefs. We will share practices that contribute to



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creating and nurturing a playful learning culture along with examples of playful learning in school. Guest bloggers will share their perspectives of learning through play. We invite you to share your thinking about this and future posts--to play with us and build understandings of how playful learning can thrive in schools.



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February 15, 2019

Navigating the paradoxes between play and school: Bringing together how children learn and how teachers teach

Ben Mardell

Learning and teaching should not stand on opposite banks and just watch the river flow by; instead, they should embark together on a journey down the water.

-Loris Malaguzzi

In our first blog post we outlined six core beliefs about playful learning in schools. The headline: it is important to bring more learning through play into schools, and this effort is neither easy nor straightforward. One reason for the difficulties: the paradoxical nature of play and school.*

Paradox noun.
par·a·dox | \ 'per-ə-,däks

- 2 a:** a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true
- b:** a self-contradictory statement that at first seems true
- c:** an argument that apparently derives self-contradictory conclusions by valid deduction from acceptable premises



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What do we mean by paradoxes between play and school? Well ...



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Play is timeless; players lose themselves in play. *School is time tabled.*

Play can be chaotic, messy, and loud. *Schools are places of order.*

Play involves risks. *In school children should be safe.*

In play children are in charge. *At school the agenda is generally set by adults.*

One can characterize the uneasy relationship between play and school in other ways as well: school leans toward right answers while play is open-ended, or school is about the transmission of culture (from how to spell to the scientific method) while play is about creating culture (inventing stories and rules). Regardless, the paradoxical nature of play and school can either be paralyzing and polarizing, or (we hope) energizing in efforts to bring more learning through play into schools.

Paralyzing. Picture the novice teacher who, in her teacher education program, has read that children learn through play. In her new job, she meets an array of learning standards. She can't "just let the kids play," but then what?

Polarizing. Recall the acrimonious debates between progressive and traditional educators. For example, should blocks be included in kindergarten classrooms. While debates can be healthy, in schools these



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disagreements can lead to different camps who work at cross purposes.

Energizing. Here we remember the great physicist and statesperson Niels Bohr, who once exclaimed, “How wonderful that we have met with a paradox. Now we have some hope of making progress.” With this kind of playful mindset, it is possible for educators to see the paradoxes between play and school not as *either/or* situations, but as *yes, and*’s. Educators can work together to support their students in taking reasonable risks and not getting seriously hurt (physically or emotionally). They can create environments where students experience agency and learn important skills.

Navigating the paradoxes of play and school requires educators willing to engage together in the complexities of education. It requires a pedagogy that brings together how children learn and how teachers teach. It brings children and teachers together on a journey down the water.

**Our thanks to colleague David Kushner for alerting us to these paradoxes through his work*



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February 25, 2019

PoP South Africa

Ben Mardell & Lynneth Solis

One of our core beliefs is that **learning through play is universal and shaped by culture**. People around the world play and have the ability to learn from that play. At the same time, play is a cultural construct. Whom children play with, how they play, where and when they play, and what age they should stop playing (if ever!) are determined by cultural contexts. The form and content of playful learning therefore varies depending on the context.

Motivated by this understanding, in 2017 we began research to answer the question: What does playful learning look and feel like in South African schools? Working closely with researchers Kgopotso Khumalo and Stephanie Nowack, we collaborated with 11 teachers in three Johannesburg/Pretoria area schools to better understand what playful learning entails in South African schools. We worked with these teachers because, as you can see in these images from three of the classrooms, they and their schools, are committed to empowering their learners, activating their imaginations, and having them enjoy school.



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An English lesson at
Esikhisini Primary School
in Atteridgeville



Choice time in the
Reception classroom at
Bryandale Preprimary in
Sandton



A language arts lesson in Nova Pioneer Ormande in
Johannesburg

photos courtesy of Steph Nowack and Kgopotso Khumalo



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You can learn more about these
classrooms, and the findings of the
entire research project in a new working



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paper titled, “Towards a South African Pedagogy of Play.” In this paper we put forward two hypotheses: a) learning through play in South African schools involves the interrelated experiences of ownership, curiosity, and enjoyment, and b) for South African learners and educators, Ubuntu is a central part of playful learning. To explain these hypotheses, we introduce the South African “Indicators of Playful Learning,” a model of what playful learning looks and feels like in these classrooms. We explain the research methods—including analysis of classroom observations and interviews with learners, teachers, and principals—used in formulating these hypotheses, explore the connections between Ubuntu and playful learning, and share examples of playful learning from South African classrooms to illustrate our hypotheses. We discuss the implications of our preliminary findings, and suggest next steps for research. Overall, the paper makes the case for a South African pedagogy of play and, by defining the phenomenon of learning through play, begins to explore what such an approach to teaching and learning might involve.

This week (February 24th through 26th) we will share our research at the first-ever African Play Conference in Pretoria. Sponsored by the South African Ministry of Basic Education, UNICEF, LEGO Foundation, and the Association for the Development of Education in Africa, the conference will gather educators, policy-makers, and researchers from across Africa and beyond, with the goal of bringing the power of learning through play to children across the continent. We look forward to exploring with the



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other participants how learning through play can become an integral part of education systems throughout Africa. You can follow the conference at [#AfricaPlay](#).



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March 7, 2019

Must you say yes to play?

Ben Mardell

Navigating the paradox between choice and the right to play

You teach kindergarten (or Grade 1 or Grade 4). Josh has come to you in tears (again). Otis and Fred have told him he can't play with them. Otis and Fred may have sensible reasons for excluding Josh. Perhaps Josh had smacked Fred in the nose (again) earlier in the morning. Perhaps, when Josh joins the game, he insists on taking the choice roles and demands that Otis take less appealing roles.

But perhaps there are nefarious reasons for the rejection. Otis may be exercising the sense of power that excluding a peer from play confers. Or Fred might be mirroring bias he has heard at home, rejecting Josh because of his skin color.

At the [International School of Billund](#) (ISB) in Denmark, teacher-researchers Marina Barbón and Sarah Sørensen are exploring how to create inclusive, welcoming environments for their K2 (five-year-old) and K1 (three and four-year-old) students.



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Image courtesy of International School of Billund

Inspired by Vivian Paley's classic teacher-research volume *You Can't Say You Can't Play*, Marina and Sarah introduce this as a possible rule in their classrooms. Understanding that the genius of Paley's work wasn't the rule itself, but rather the process she undertook to explore the issue with her kindergarteners, Marina and Sarah facilitate multiple conversations with their children. They record these conversations and listen to them with colleagues in weekly study group meetings to consider what they might do next.

In Sarah's class, at first the children embrace the idea of this new rule. But after a few days a couple of vocal children sway the group to abandon it. Conversation with her colleagues leads Sarah to the conclusion that the underlying values that would lead to embracing *you can't say you can't play* - kindness and compassion - are missing in the community. She decides to investigate how she can promote these



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values by supporting children in reflecting on their play.

Marina introduces the rule to her class by explaining that the children in Sarah's class are giving it a try, and suggests they give it a go for a week.



Image courtesy of International School of Billund

The children's responses include: "let's do it for a month" and "let's do it until we are nine." Despite this positive reception, Marina soon finds children looking for loopholes to the rule, for example, saying "I'll play with you later," or looking down and pretending not to hear a request to play. One child, when asked to play, even pretended to hear a classmate calling him - a ruse that was discovered because the classmate wasn't in school that day.

Marina and Sarah are navigating the paradox between choice and the right to play. In play, children choose with whom they want to play, for how long, and how to sort out disagreements (including saying, "I don't want to play with you anymore"). At the same time, in school, children have a right to equal access to



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the resources for learning (pencils, paint, **and** play). As a core resource for learning, play should not be something from which children are excluded.

This navigation includes the recognition that play often entails a meta-exploration of rules. In play, the players get to make and change the rules. Marina and Sarah are guiding their young students in this exploration of making and changing their community rules. In thoughtful, democratic ways, they are providing children choice and helping all be involved in play.



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March 21, 2019

Questions as invitations to play

Ben Mardell

How is our community like a forest?

What does the word compassion mean to you?

What do you notice when you transfer an idea from one material to another?

What strategies support you as a mathematician?

What would it be like to be the size of a lady bug?

In early January I had the pleasure of visiting [Opal School](#) in Portland, Oregon. I spent three mornings in the Dogwood classroom where Heather Scerba teaches 21 engaged, energetic, and welcoming six, seven, and eight-year-olds.

One of the first things that strikes you when you enter the Dogwood classroom is the wealth of questions around the room. Some are printed out in big, bold letters and posted on the walls. Some are part of documentation panels that include children's thoughts about the questions and analysis of this thinking by the teachers. Some are part of working documents where hypotheses and data related to the question are being collected. Some are hand-written on white boards and meant as provocations for the children as they



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write, draw, and explore with materials like clay and blocks. Some are questions asked by the teachers, and others by the children.



Some (but not all) of the questions found in Dogwood

How is our community like a forest? A big, complicated question. And after spending time in Dogwood, it is clear the children are up for questions like these. Indeed, the intellectual life of the classroom revolves around these questions. For example, *how is our community like a forest* is part of a set of questions that also includes *what is a community* and *what is a forest*. The questions are the basis for an ongoing investigation that will last the entire school year.

I love these questions. They call for deep thinking and imagining, and they clearly benefit from collaboration. Questions like *how is our community like a forest* are open-ended. And not only isn't there one right answer, as far as I know, no one has answered this question before. The children must invent their own answers. The questions in the Dogwood classroom **are invitations to play**—to play and be playful with ideas.



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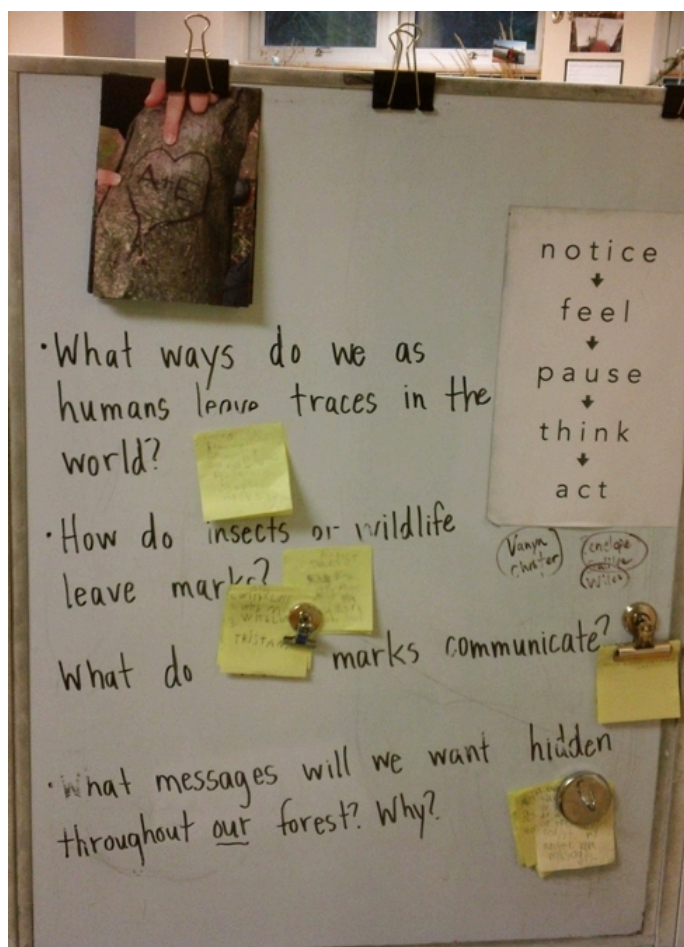
Naturally I was curious where the questions came from, so I asked Heather about the origins of four questions that were on a white board in the meeting area:

What ways do we as humans leave traces in the world?

How do insects or wildlife leave marks?

What do these marks communicate?

What message will we want hidden throughout our forest? Why?



The white board in the meeting area

The children encountered these questions for the first time at their Monday morning meeting and began to “crack them open,” to use an Opal term. After discussing the questions they



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went off and explored them in small groups. The class returned to these questions each morning during my visit, and they guided the children's explorations into forests and communities during the week.

Heather explained the genesis of the questions and how they are connected to the learning goals of the classroom, have specific children in mind, and are things that she and her colleagues are curious about too. At the outset of the school year Opal teachers write intention letters outlining their learning goals (articulated in the form of questions) for their students. In Dogwood, the teachers wondered how might nurturing our relationship with the natural world support empathy and agency? An investigation grounded in the nearby forest ensued.

The preceding Thursday, as part of this long-term inquiry, Amy Maki, the PE teacher, had taken the children on a hike into the forest. She emailed Heather her notes and photos about the ideas, interests, and questions that emerged during the hike. A heart with initials carved into a tree was one of the children's big discoveries.



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Heather decided to use this interest, but, as she explained, “I didn’t want them to get stuck on marks and just focus on the carvings. I wanted them to think bigger.” So her first question used the word traces. Her second question, about wildlife, was written with a child who loves animals in mind. In the final question, “hidden” appeared because Heather noticed the children using this word in various conversations and felt it could infuse an element of surprise and playfulness. Heather explained that writing these questions wasn’t a solo endeavor. They emerged in conversations with colleagues.

Of course, not all the questions in Dogwood were written on the wall. Teachers and students were asking questions all the time. The nature of teacher questions, which challenge, guide and motivate students, is worth remarking on as well—but that is the subject of another post. Until then, if you want to learn more about Opal School you can visit their [website](#). And by the way: *What would it be like to be the size of a lady bug?*



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This post will also be shared on the [Opal School blog](#) - we encourage you to visit!



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April 5, 2019

Using Play to Support Teacher Inquiry

Mara Krechevsky

What does playful learning look like for adults? At the [International School of Billund](#) (ISB), [Project Zero](#) (PZ) researchers have collaborated with teacher-researchers for the past four years on the Pedagogy of Play (PoP) Project, using an approach we call [Playful Participatory Research](#) (PPR). PZ researchers meet with small groups of teachers in monthly study groups to explore a topic of shared interest about supporting learning through play. Teachers collect documentation of student learning related to their questions to share and analyze with the study group. PPR also engages teachers in playful provocations to provoke creative thinking and investigate new ideas in the classroom, occasionally involving students as co-researchers along the way.

The following musings grow out of my work as the facilitator for the “Play and Academics” study group. I share these thoughts as part of an ongoing conversation my colleagues and I are having about how play can be used as a strategy to support adult learners.

* * * * *

As the study group facilitator, I spent some time trying to find enticing



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materials to begin our first session of the year with a “playful provocation.” How could I engage and inspire the group as we launched our exploration of using play to teach academic learning goals? Although three volunteers used the materials in a skit with humorous results, I questioned whether they achieved my intended effect of inspiring the imaginations of the adult learners.



enticing (?) materials

After the session, I was surprised to find that the majority of study group members reported in their



study group skit

reflections that they experienced the most *choice*, *wonder*, and *delight* (indicators of playful learning identified by PZ researchers and ISB teachers) when “coming up with a group question to guide their learning throughout the year.” I had put no time into planning how to make the question-generating part of the day playful. Moreover, coming up with a question is challenging intellectual work. The reflections included the following responses:



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“When coming up with the guiding question, **I found myself really wondering about the ideas that were discussed.** We didn’t have answers to our questions, only some theories and observations.”

“When we were planning/creating our group question, we were **sharing ideas, creating, focusing.**”

“Discussing what the team question should be. **Sparring with new colleagues.**”

What were the influences that led group members to deem “coming up with a group question” such a playful part of the day? Although I had not planned an explicitly “playful” component for the exercise, the invitation to develop team questions seemed to engender choice, wonder, and delight. Possible influences include:

- The group had an **authentic task:** coming up with a question that would guide their individual and group learning for the year.
- Each team had the freedom to choose **where to complete the task.**



*study group teams
working on questions
inside...*



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...and outside

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· The **conditions** were in place for a great deal of **self-directed learning**:

- a clear goal (that also served as a form of accountability): an articulated question which would be **made public** online

- time to talk at length, which likely supported **depth over breadth**

- tools to support the goal (e.g., a discussion protocol about choosing and honing a question)

- occasional support and guidance from the PZ facilitator

- choreography of individual and group learning: we started with time to develop individual questions, and ended by sharing both within and across study groups

- being part of something bigger than oneself (*PoP* is a school-wide initiative)

- perhaps a lingering **good feeling** from the very funny opening skit in response to the provocation



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study group whole group share-out

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A middle school student at ISB once told us that learning is rewarding when it's hard and enjoyable. Perhaps planning for "minds-on" learning can entail as much play as planning for "hands-on" learning. I have found [Opal School](#) (Portland, Oregon) Director Susan MacKay's claim that "play is a strategy for learning, not an activity we need to make time for" compelling and provocative. Perhaps playful learning exists on a continuum. Many of my PZ and ISB colleagues have facilitated study groups with such imaginative and playful provocations as going outside to build fairy houses, refashioning the study group space to resemble a café, or sending written feedback to each other on paper airplanes. Strategies for learning or activities to make time for? Or both?



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April 19, 2019

Exploring Playful Pedagogy in an Urban High School

Misty Ferguson, guest author

From time to time we invite guests to share on our blog. Today's post comes from Misty Ferguson, a doctoral candidate in the Culture, Literacy, and Language program at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Before matriculating to UTSA, Misty spent fifteen years teaching English, ESL, and Spanish in the United States and abroad.

As part of my research into secondary language teachers' ideas and attitudes about play, I interviewed Ms. K, a teacher at an urban high school. Even after probing Ms. K's ideas about play for an hour, her forceful, almost instinctive, answer to my final question surprised me:

- Me: Would you like your classes to be more playful?
- Ms. K: Oh, yeah. I feel like that should be the point of school.

She quickly continued, explaining what playful teaching might look like and



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what blocks it in the classroom:

- Ms. K: I mean, schools, even administration also see that—it's just the weird balance—how to get students interacting, how to get them up, moving, playing, not just— rows, taking notes, doing worksheets. I think a lot of people in education see the importance of play and fun and interaction in the classroom. It's the dilemma of how we accomplish [it].

Ms. K's under-resourced and over-policed school district in the southwestern US serves mostly Mexican-American students facing the challenges of poverty. To address the perennial problem of students failing the state-mandated test, which keeps them from graduating, the district developed a series of "intervention" classes for students who fail or are presumed to be at risk of failing the exam(s). Ms. K taught these mandated classes—remediation on paper, but in reality test preparation. In intervention classes, students were expected to complete worksheets based on released-test questions, which involved reading a few pages of text, answering a handful of multiple-choice questions, correcting errors, and repeating the process. The resulting mix of high-stakes pressure for students and their performance-evaluated teachers; boring, repetitive assignments; and routinely apathetic responses from students often created an oppositional classroom environment in which teachers pleaded, prodded, and threatened while students complained, resisted, and refused. Fun was "off-task" in the intervention learning environment; joyful learning was just not the point.



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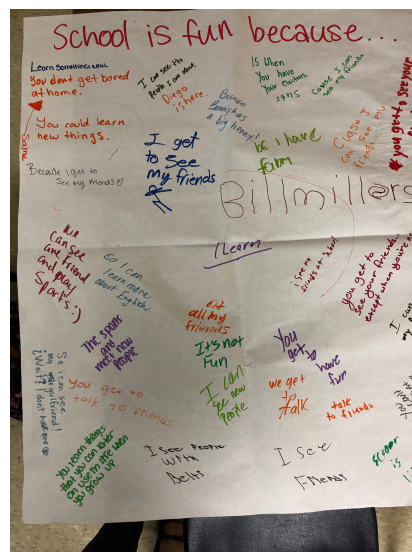
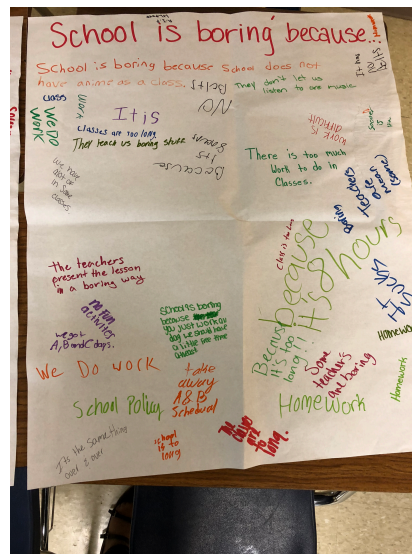
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As part of her pursuit of playful pedagogy, Ms. K asked students to reflect on what makes school boring or fun. They collected their ideas on chart paper as an initial brainstorm for problem/solution essays on the topic of school improvement which they composed, compiled, and sent to school officials.



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The above interview launched Ms. K and me into a cooperative action research inquiry over the course of an academic



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year in which we explored the “weird balance”: how might adopting playful pedagogy invite joy and positivity into her intervention classes despite the narrow curriculum and serious stakes?

We discovered that the “weird balance” is not a new conundrum. John Dewey considered it in 1910 in *How We Think*, explaining that too much is made of the play/work dichotomy and that schools look too much to work for learning outcomes, leaving play little leveraged. A few years later, in *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey explained that education ought to cultivate the ability to accomplish work with a playful mindset.

It was Dewey’s elevation of playfulness that Ms. K took to heart. She couldn’t change the ends her students had to work toward, but she could try to infuse the means with joy. Thus, she planned elements of play for her lessons. Instead of nagging students to do worksheets, she cut the worksheets into strips and hid them in plastic Easter eggs all over the classroom. She invited students to read and write whatever texts they enjoyed. She let them use their devices and technology whenever possible for learning purposes. She adopted a playful mindset in her interactions with students, reaching for playful responses rather than punitive ones. For example, a mischief-maker once shouted across the room, “Ms. K, I have to go take a sh*t,” knowing, of course, that such language was prohibited in the classroom. “Do what you need to in there,” Ms. K deadpanned, garnering boisterous laughs, “but clean



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up your language in here.” Playfully, she avoided a classic classroom conflict.

Reflecting on her year of playful pedagogy, Ms. K discovered that, while her students had not reached new heights of self-directed learning—a central hope of playful pedagogy—the “weird balance” was not such a barrier. The serious work of test-preparation could be infused with play after all. What most impressed Ms. K was the capacity of playful pedagogy to build human connection. Because of her playful approach, Ms. K and her students shared laughs, made memories, and, she says, got to know one another genuinely. She called her classroom a “refuge of joy” for them and for herself. She hopes that their positive experience, whatever their test results, functions as a deposit toward lifelong interest in reading and writing.



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May 3, 2019

Playing with the physical environment in teacher meetings

Katie Ertel & Idah Khan O'Neill

Today's post is co-authored by Katie Ertel (from Project Zero) and Idah Khan O'Neill, the Primary Years Programme Coordinator and a primary teacher at the International School of Billund, Denmark. Idah has been working as a teacher-researcher and study group facilitator with the Pedagogy of Play project since its inception in 2015.

On the [Pedagogy of Play](#) project, one of our beliefs about playful learning in schools is that **a culture of playful learning for children requires a culture of playful learning for adults**. At the [International School of Billund \(ISB\)](#), Denmark, educators are committed to creating and supporting an adult culture of playful learning. One of the places that the teachers have the opportunity to play is in study groups--small groups of teachers who meet regularly to explore questions around playful learning by documenting their practice.



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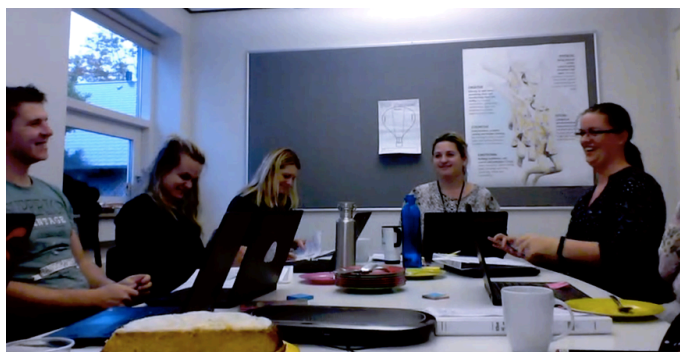
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In these groups, teachers experiment with new ideas, imagine possibilities, take risks, and work through challenges.

And yet...what does that look like? How do you bring playfulness into teacher meetings when teachers are busy and adult meetings are often in the afternoon or evenings when teachers are tired? During the 2017-2018 school year, we -- Idah Khan O'Neill (from ISB) and Katie Ertel (from Project Zero) -- co-facilitated a study group of teachers at ISB, affectionately called the "Oddballs" due to the diverse range of roles they held at the school—classroom, specialist, and after school club teachers.

The Oddballs' study group sessions met monthly from 16.00-18.00 in the afternoon in the ISB Conference Room. Several months into the school year, it seemed that study group members were learning from our time together, and that at least moments in each session were playful, but the sessions just did not have a sustained feeling of playfulness that we believed would contribute to our learning.



The Oddballs in the ISB Conference Room

How could we change this dynamic?
Inspired by a [playful environments](#)



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planning tool made by our study group the previous year, we wondered if changing the physical environment of our study group sessions might help. We thought about how different environments set different expectations for how we act, feel, and think. Could cues in the environment engender a sense of choice, wonder, and delight [indicators of playful learning] among study group members? We contemplated where teachers might like to be in the late afternoon and considered cultural factors like *hygge*, a Danish word that roughly translates to having a good and cozy time with friends. The idea of a café came to mind. We associate a visit to a café with friends, deep conversations, good drinks, and agency. Just what we hoped for our study group sessions! We shared our idea to have a café with study group participants, gathering ideas and soliciting feedback.



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Opening night at the Oddballs Café

For opening night at theOddballs Café, we adorned classroom tables with “table cloths” (fabric in the school’s Creator Space) and flameless candles used throughout the school. We put on music and made the agenda for the evening in the format of a menu. Over the course of the year, the café took on other forms, more and less elaborate, as the group evolved and different participants took turns bringing in snacks. One signature moment was a “wine” bar spa night, with bubbly (nonalcoholic) drinks. Another afternoon we hosted a movie night theme.

After the café’s opening night, it was clear that the changes to the physical environment had an impact on the teachers’ experiences. Liviu Sadevoac, a middle school physical education teacher, explained, “the idea of the café...it was really good for me. It was somehow, like, a mood, disconnecting from something, and trying to breathe, calm down, and express yourself from deep inside. Because if you're feeling stressed...you can miss something. So... I think it's really playful...I have learned a lot through it.” Sorina Mutu Donas, a



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Primary 4 teacher, commented, "I loved the set up: the music, the café, the coziness...you felt like you were just hanging out with your friends for a coffee, [like] you were just talking about how your kids are doing...It's the state of mind."



Scenes from the "Wine" Bar Spa Night at the Oddballs Café



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We still wonder what exactly it was about the café that changed the nature of our learning, that contributed to the playful state of mind that Liviu and Sorina express. Was it that it activated feelings or memories we equate with a visit to cafés (a spa, a bar, the movies)? Or was the state of mind influenced by



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pretending we were somewhere else? Was it the novelty of doing something new or the novelty of being in an environment we don't typically associate with school? Perhaps it was different for each of us.

Over time, and even into the next year, some group members remained enthusiastic about the cafés, while others seemed to grow tired of the pretense. We have learned on the Pedagogy of Play project that what is playful to one is not necessarily playful to another. Playing with learning environments is no exception. One study group member shared that the cafes were almost too relaxed, that as the year went on, she did not find that she was productive enough. Is there a point at which the playfulness can interfere with the learning? How do we find that sweet spot between play that enables us to enter a playful mindset and play that takes over our learning experience?



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May 17, 2019

Families as Allies in the Construction of a Culture of Playful Learning in Schools

Catalina Rey Guerra, S. Lynneth Solis, and Ben Mardell

Today's post is co-authored by Lynneth and Ben (from the PoP team) and Catalina Rey-Guerra, researcher and project coordinator at the School of Education in Universidad de los Andes, Colombia. Catalina's research focuses on the reciprocal interactions between children and their families, teachers, and learning environments, while searching for protective and promotive factors of early development.

When principals and teachers start cultivating a culture of learning through play at school, one of the main challenges that arises is making families part of this process.



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Sometimes educators struggle to figure out how best to share the principles and co-construct practices of playful learning with families in order to build a common language and understanding. A Pedagogy of Play can help adults (teachers, principals, family members) to navigate the paradoxes between play and school while acting as a bridge between schools and families in exploring and engaging in playful learning both at home and at school.

Research on family engagement suggests a number of effective approaches to support educators in engaging families, which in turn can help cultivate a culture of playful learning in schools where educators, students, and families all work together. We suggest four approaches that can help connect families and schools through playful learning. We also propose a continuum that characterizes the extent to which this engagement takes place at home and at school.

1. **Examining our beliefs.** Understanding both educators' and families' attitudes and beliefs around play and playful learning, and how culture and previous experiences have shaped those beliefs, can be a good start for building a common vision of the role of play in learning. Finding agreement on how to support learning through play, and why playful learning is important for children's learning and development, needs to be based on a respectful and empathetic understanding of the others' perspective and expectations right from the beginning.



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2. **Recognizing positive efforts on both sides of the bridge.** In order to build the bridge and actually get to cross it, families and educators need to meet in the middle, recognizing both sides' first priority is supporting what is best for children. In this sense, a playful participatory research approach can help to explore the different ways in which adults themselves might engage in play in their everyday lives at home or at school, and how this helps to create a playful environment for children. Starting from what is already happening and working at home and in the classroom recognizes the efforts on both sides.

3. **Communicating openly and regularly about playful learning.** Ensuring a respectful ongoing communication where both sides are open to listening and sharing their knowledge supports learning through play. This requires various means of communication, consistency in exchanges, and creative approaches that help make the communication comfortable and even playful. It also means acknowledging the complexity of teaching and learning. Believing in learning through play does not mean play is appropriate for all learners in all situations. Rather than creating a false dichotomy between playfulness and learning goals, schools and families can embrace an attitude of "yes, and"—where both playfulness and learning goals are communicated and discussed openly.

4. **Making families part of the process.** Recognizing families' role as fundamental in co-constructing a culture of learning through play helps to find alignment among adults about



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the role of play in learning. This requires acknowledging that families' knowledge is essential in the process of creating a culture of playful learning. For instance, doing "play biographies" where parents can reflect on what they played as kids and what they learned from this, or having the opportunity to suggest ways in which the curriculum can address some topics in a playful way.

Continuum of Family Engagement in Playful Learning

Family engagement in playful learning can happen both at home and at school. The continuum of family engagement in playful learning (see Figure 1) is designed to show some of the different ways in which families can get involved in children's learning process. On one side are home-based activities such as guided play or playful learning extensions where parents can help their children learn through playful activities designed by teachers and families, led by children, and scaffolded by parents or caregivers. On the other side are school-based activities that can range from parents attending or supporting classroom activities and suggesting new playful learning activities to teachers, to meeting with other families and teachers to engage in playful participatory research to explore how playful learning can be embedded throughout the school experience. In between are activities that can happen in "the middle of the bridge" such as meetings between teachers and parents, or meetings among parents to



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discuss ways to build and support a culture of playful learning.

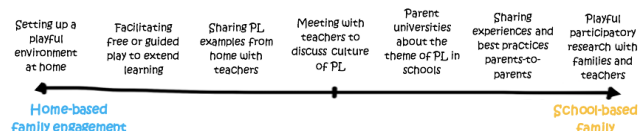


Figure 1: Continuum of family engagement in playful learning (PL).

Our continuum suggests just some of the activities families can engage in across the home and school contexts. Each school community can generate other ideas and activities to try out specific to their school and cultural setting. In fact, one way to co-construct a culture of playful learning is through brainstorming together. Families can be allies in creating a culture where playful learning can thrive through the continuum of playful learning experiences.

"It's wrong to think of play as the interruption of ordinary life. Consider instead playing as the underlying, always there, continuum of experiences..."

Richard Schechner, 1993



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May 31, 2019

Morning Meeting at the Mfesane Early Childhood Education Centre: Indicators of Playful Learning in Action

Ben Mardell

In March I had the pleasure of visiting the Mfesane Early Childhood Development Centre. Mfesane, which means compassion in isiXhosa, is located in an informal settlement in East London, South Africa. The experience confirmed that the *Indicators of Playful Learning: South Africa* have something to offer the country's educators.



The Mfesane Early Childhood
Development Centre

At Mfesane we were greeted by director Ms. Vezi. I was then able to spend time in Nontsikeleto Mabhoza's classroom. Ms. Mabhoza teaches 33 three and four-



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year-olds in a room that is approximately 12 by 15 feet. By American standards there isn't much stuff in the room. There are three bookshelves: one with 12 books, one with a similar number of stuffed animals, and one with approximately 60 wooden blocks.



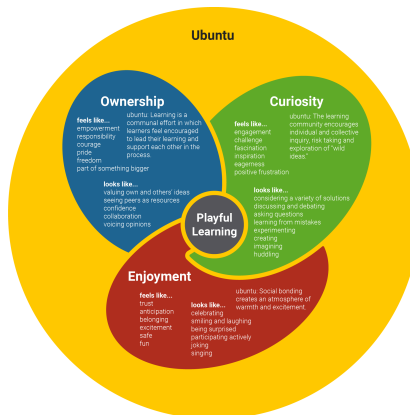
The block shelf at Mfesane

I used the Indicators of Playful Learning: South Africa as a lens through which to view what I was seeing at Mfesane. The indicators were developed last year by Kgopotso Khumalo, Steph Nowack, Lynne Solis and myself through observations, interviews and discussions with 11 South African teachers. The indicators aim to answer the question: what does playful learning involve in South Africa? Through our research we identified three categories—ownership, curiosity, and enjoyment—that describe the nature of learners' experiences as they build understanding, knowledge, and skill through playful learning. *For a full description of how the indicators were developed and what they involve please see our [working paper](#).*



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Indicators of Playful Learning: South Africa

Soon after my arrival at Mfesane, Ms. Mabhoza began morning meeting. The children sat in the circle and followed a routine they seemed very familiar with. The meeting began with a prayer. The children then chanted the days of the week and the months of the year. The meeting was in isiXhosa with a good dose of English, and the group moved seamlessly between the two languages. *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* (in English) was followed by the children walking around in a circle, calling out “We are Marching” as they stamped their feet. Frere Jacques in isiXhosa was next. Throughout, all children seemed involved. They sang with gusto. Often Ms. Mabhoza watched them with a smile, letting them set the pace for the songs and chants.

I was delighted to see many of the indicators of playful learning “light up.”

Enjoyment. There was smiling and laughing and singing as the children participating actively. It seemed that they felt safe and were having fun.

Ownership. The children knew these songs. They sang with confidence and





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collaborated with each other. They seemed proud and enjoyed being part of the group (part of something bigger than themselves).

What didn't light up, what I didn't see, was curiosity. I did not see the children considering a variety of solutions, discussing or debating, asking questions or imagining.

This is not to say that curiosity is never activated at Mfesane. I was only at the center for a short time. Nor am I saying that using the indicators will magically transform the center. More toys and books and higher salaries for staff certainly have a role here.

What I am saying is that the indicators might be helpful to Ms. Verdi and Ms. Mabhoza as they think about their circle time—how to keep the feelings of ownership and enjoyment and try to activate curiosity. Perhaps a song where the children would have to suggest different animals to complete verses. Perhaps the children having to decide different motions to use as they marched around in their circle. Of course, the educators at Mfesane know far better than I what would activate their children's curiosity. What I am saying is I hope these 33 children have opportunities to create, experiment, and imagine.

Dr. Wycliffe Otieno, head of UNICEF's South African Department of Education and Adolescent Development has written:

Project Zero's Pedagogy of Play is demonstrating that playful learning is



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real and practical. From the glittering cities like Pretoria to the fringes of suburban East London, South African learners can experience playful learning; that it is deeply embedded on Ubuntu, and it is embraced by educators and children alike. While we continue to position the education system to build and inculcate the essential skills for a changing world, playful learning, rooted in Ubuntu, is a key facilitator of the 4Cs. What PoP is doing is to help systematize this intrinsically African way of learning, unleash its potential, nurture the requisite capacities of educators, and enrich it with new knowledge on the theory and practice of teaching and learning, including its role in problem solving, localization of content, among others. I believe that in due time, we shall be able to share with the world what we have learnt in South Africa and that our children will be better off being able learn in the most effective way: by making learning FUN.

My short time at Mfesane has me agreeing with Dr. Otieno. As the current phase of Pedagogy of Play: South Africa comes to an end, my hope is that a planning tool based on the indicators (stay tuned for a link!) will help educators at Mfesane and around South Africa unleash the power of learning through play.



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June 10, 2019

Playful learning leads to celebration leads to playful learning

Sidsel N. Overgaard

Sidsel is the Senior Communications Manager at the International School of Billund and parent to two ISB primary students. She has been with PoP since we began in 2015.

As a long-serving member of the administration of the International School of Billund (ISB)--long-serving being a relative term at a six-year-old school--I know this place pretty well. I was here for the inception of the Pedagogy of Play (PoP) project and watched as the Indicators of Playful Learning evolved from a three-ring circus of choice, wonder, and delight into the lovely three-petaled flower they are today. I've written a small library of handbooks, know where we keep the extra ice packs, and, yes, I do have a few ideas of where you could try looking for little Emily's lost jacket. But most importantly (no offense, lost jacket), as part of the communications team, I get to be a frequent visitor to the classroom, where I have helped to document many wonderful examples of playful learning.



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And yet, each year toward the beginning of May, I am introduced to ISB all over again.



Image courtesy of ISB.

May is when we hold our annual PoP Celebration of Learning, an evening dedicated to exploring and teaching, singing and eating, silliness and seriousness. In short, the Celebration is a moment in time that embodies, on a school-wide level, a core principle of PoP, that *play and playfulness thrive in supportive school cultures*.

About half of ISB's teachers participate in PoP study groups throughout the year, meeting monthly to investigate a variety of questions related to learning through play. This year, their questions included:

- How does the use of pretense influence learning?
- What if we thought of Kindergarten as the R&D wing of the school?
- How can we use play to improve inclusiveness?



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· What if we harnessed playful learning to make student reflections more meaningful?

(For a snappy overview of each group's work, check out these [movie trailers](#)).

In advance of the Celebration, each study group creates a display explaining members' questions and their resulting discoveries (or further questions). The displays may include student quotes, photos, audio interviews, or video documentation. This year, several groups synthesized their learning into tools to be pocketed by colleagues for future reference. Each group also hosts a 40-minute deep-dive into some of its questions (the only difficult part of the evening comes in having to choose which workshop to attend).



During the celebration teachers have time to browse all the displays and reading materials before choosing two workshops to attend. Among this year's playful workshop



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activities: an “escape room” challenge about inclusiveness and parent collaboration. Images courtesy of ISB.

Even for those of us who think we have a good understanding of what’s going on around here, this exhibit never ceases to amaze. Every Celebration is an evening of surprises and inspiration, both for study group members who may not always be aware of what *other groups* are working on, and for the rest of us who, despite working under the same roof as these teacher-researchers, may not always grasp the depth of their insights.



The MYP study group presented their “reflection wheel” intended to make student reflections more purposeful. Image courtesy of ISB.



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On a personal level, not only does the Celebration provide fuel for another year of tours, articles, and posts about PoP, but as an ISB parent, it thrills me to see how deeply my children’s teachers are reflecting on their practice and striving to innovate with each new day.



Although the Celebration is a staff-only affair, it is in recognition of the exhibition's powerful potential energy that we have started a new tradition of hosting an open house for parents and community members on the following day. While it can be hard to break through busy family schedules, attendance has grown in the two years we've held the open house, and we are confident it will continue to increase as word gets out about the level of inspiration on offer.



Parents also got to have a go at the escape room the next day. Image courtesy of ISB.

We like to talk about paradoxes in PoP, and I would suggest that an energizing paradox lies hidden inside the Celebration itself. That is, that while each display aims to illustrate the pedagogical risks being taken by individual teachers in the name of playful learning, the cumulative effect is to make the whole PoP endeavour feel *less* risky by demonstrating the overarching care with which those risks are taken. As that feeling of security grows, our community becomes ever more supportive and, with that support, ISB teachers are free to progress even



farther down the path of playful learning.



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June 28, 2019

How playful interventions can support high-quality learning in schools

Ollie Bray

LEGO Foundation

We're thrilled to link to this blog post by Ollie Bray, Initiatives Lead in the Connecting Play and Education Programme (and our partner) at the LEGO Foundation. From Ollie:

A growing body of evidence supports that play is fundamental for children's positive development and an essential way to foster the skills required to thrive in today's world, why the LEGO Foundation is looking to create systemic change in formal education by making sure the value of learning through play is understood and acted upon.

The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) is an international large-scale survey of teachers, school leaders and learning environments in schools that is published every five years. The results of the latest survey (the largest ever survey involving



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teachers globally) were published in June 2019.

We invite you to click the link below to hear Ollie discuss how playful interventions can address some of the challenges and opportunities created by the TALIS 2018 results (and highlights some of our own Pedagogy of Play work in the process).

How playful interventions can support high-quality learning in schools



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July 12, 2019

PoP Online

Sharing with and learning from educators

As researchers on the Pedagogy of Play (PoP) project, we often think on the macro and micro level about our work. Describing what we do as being at the nexus of research and practice, our ultimate goal is to contribute both to the larger field of education and to impact daily classroom practice. We aim to share with stakeholders around the world PoP ideas and the tools we co-create with practitioners, so that more children (and educators!) have the opportunity to learn through play in school.

Researchers across [Project Zero](#), the research center where PoP is located, have been developing online courses as a way to offer practitioners the opportunity to dip their toes into various research areas. In March and April of this year, some of us on the PoP team offered a short, four-week course for participants to learn about and try some emerging PoP ideas. Joining us were sixty-eight educators, representing 13 countries; early childhood through higher education; and, a variety of contexts, including government-funded and independent schools in rural, urban, and suburban settings.

Throughout the course, educators interactively explored the research,



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developed a nuanced understanding of learning through play, and found opportunities to incorporate playful learning practices into their classrooms. They investigated questions, such as:

Why is learning through play important? What does learning through play look like and involve in your teaching? How is learning through play culturally and contextually specific?

Through playful provocations, readings, and examples from our partnering educators in Denmark and South Africa, participants engaged playfully with each other while considering the benefits of playful learning.

Participants offered new and different perspectives on our research, expanding our understanding of what playful learning looks and feels like and the opportunities and challenges afforded when bringing play into formal educational settings. We look forward to sharing more of our work in future courses, and learning with and from an even larger group of educators from around the world.



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July 26, 2019

A surfing lesson: Staying in touch with playful learning

Ben Mardell

Earlier this year I had the opportunity to spend two weeks in South Africa. The first week I attended the Africa Play conference in Pretoria. The second week I visited schools and early childhood development centers in the Eastern Cape and Free State. Over the weekend I found myself on the Wild Coast, a beautiful stretch of beach on the Indian Ocean between East London and Durbin.

The first morning on the beach I noticed a sign advertising surfing lessons. I have never surfed. I have never been on a skate or snow board. I don't have great balance, nor am I particularly coordinated. So naturally I thought: why not?

The next morning found me and Keegan, the instructor, on the beach with a surf board.



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Surfs up on the Wild Coast

Headline 1: I was a disaster as a surfer. I never stood up on the board. Never got close. Even laying on the board, I managed to wipe out in spectacular ways.

Headline 2: I had a great time. I loved being in the water. I enjoyed the new challenge. I even enjoyed wiping out, getting flipped over in the waves. If I had the chance, I would definitely try again.

And my surf lesson prompted a few reflections about playful learning:

Playful learning is important for beginners.

Beginners fail. They fail a lot. Play is the perfect venue for this failure. Just like the four-year-old who thumbs through a book but is not reading in the mature sense of the word, my surf lesson was low stakes. I could try and try again. And then eventually say, *That's it for today*. Not a revelatory insight. This is the reason why one is most likely to find play in school at the start, with young children, and at the beginning of learning experiences for older students.



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Playful learning may be equally important further along in the learning process.

Between my unsuccessful attempts to stand on the surf board, Keegan and I chatted. He said something that really struck me: “When surfing gets really frustrating is after you’ve learned to stand. Then there is so more to learn. How to make turns. How to read the ocean to get the right wave. And it’s really frustrating when you aren’t getting better.” How can educators help learners push through the frustration that comes after the start (a situation not unique to surfing)? By creating spaces where risk taking and failure are accepted and expected; by keeping the process playful.

Stay in touch with your own playful learning.

In the business and stress of adulthood, one can easily lose touch with play. At the Bryandale Preprimary School outside Johannesburg, South Africa, teachers intentionally stay in touch with their own playful learning in order to do a better job teaching. Every Friday they arrive early to work. Gathering together, they take turns picking a game or an activity to play. Principal Gillian Leach explains, “As learning through play is a primary strategy for children, we want to play as well.” The staff’s Friday play concludes with a debrief. Teachers’ reflections have led to the realizations that in games where a player picks someone for the next turn, “it feels bad to be left out,” and that in games with a lot of movement, physical contact is inevitable. As Gillian explains, “We were



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always moaning at the kids for bumping into each other. Now there is more understanding towards the children when they collide.” Gillian does not know in advance how the teachers’ play will unfold or what conclusions they will make from their Friday mornings together. She, like her staff and the children at Bryandale, are engaging in the joy and complexities of playful learning.

Now that I’m back in Cambridge, there aren’t many opportunities to surf. But I just saw a sign for mahjong lessons. Perhaps a blog post on that is coming.



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August 9, 2019

Project Zero Classroom 2019 - A playful adventure of stepping into the unknown

Steph Nowack & Kgopotso
Khumalo

Today's post comes from Steph Nowack and Kgopotso Khumalo. They are based in Johannesburg, South Africa, and are researchers at Care for Education, a non profit organization focusing on early childhood development and learning through play. Since October 2017 they have been active partners of Project Zero, working on the Pedagogy of Play project in South Africa.



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Steph and Kgopotso in Cambridge for the Project Zero Classroom 2019

In 2017 an exciting project started in South Africa. The Pedagogy of Play team began a quest to find out what playful learning looks and feels like in three South African schools. Steph (a psychologist from Pretoria) and Kgopotso (a sociologist from Soweto) started working together two years ago as local researchers to explore wonderful playful learning moments in classrooms filled with Ubuntu. Interestingly, despite the different backgrounds, our work as researchers, our shared values as scholars and as life-long learners, were aligned to those held by Project Zero. So, when we heard about the opportunity to spend a week in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to be Fellows at the Project Zero Classroom 2019 (PZC 2019), we were curious to see how we ourselves would dive into a playful learning experience and feel a sense of ownership, curiosity and enjoyment.



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Never having travelled to USA before, we found ourselves mentally preparing for this trip for a long time. We were excited



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and felt a sense of anticipation. We celebrated that we would be experiencing this adventure together. And yet, we felt a simultaneous hint of nervousness and anxiety as the date of departure crept closer. What if we would not understand concepts as fast as others? What if we felt uncomfortable in the unknown? Is this how students feel when stepping into a classroom, not knowing what to expect? We think that this concoction of emotion is what many students must encounter in school when trying to learn new concepts or being tasked with something that they do not understand. PZC 2019 had a great way to meet this unknown -- with play that enabled us to learn deeply and significantly. Perhaps we can use some of the PZC 2019 ideas to model how we engage with younger learners in the classroom.

Apart from the sometimes uncomfortable feeling of stepping into the unknown, we also expected the usual 'pretend to listen to the presenter while jotting down some notes which you know you'll never come back to' or worse, listening to experts prescribing solutions to problems they have little knowledge of. Yet, we soon discovered that the PZC 2019 was quite different from the typical conference. From the first day we were reminded to think of this workshop as an 'excursion to the beach, to comb through all the information and only take home things that apply to your specific context.' This not only became a theme for us throughout the week, but also a realization that this was a different kind of gathering of educators, practitioners and administrators. Apart from being



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able to listen to plenaries and attend mini-courses, we also had a chance to meet with our study groups where we engaged in thinking routines and reflected on how to apply what we had learned to our specific context. *Are you kidding me - a classroom that values our thoughts?* Now that's refreshing!

We noticed that the mini-courses had a unique kind of facilitation. When tasked to build an airplane out of paper that had to travel a certain amount of distance with weights attached to it, we were given enough papers to try and test out our ideas without feeling scared to 'mess up' our first attempt. The facilitators did not try to convince us learners of a specific concept. Rather, we were encouraged to experience the concept ourselves. We were reminded of the importance of working in small groups and paying attention to group dynamics and having an individual document this process. We noticed how we, just like younger learners, looked to each other for help, learned together, experimented with our imagination, tried and tested out new ideas. We had opportunities to pause and reflect on our process.

In August, we are facilitating a workshop on the [playful learning indicators](#) developed with teachers at three South African schools. We have held this workshop before, and it was well received but we are thinking of how we can make it even more playful. Our heads are fizzing and buzzing with all the information we have learned at PZC. Yet, we have a direction on how to break all these ideas down into practical ideas. This is critical, as one can easily



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end up feeling so overwhelmed with everything one has soaked up, that one ends up doing nothing. Thankfully, we are already thinking of incorporating thinking routines and playful facilitation techniques into our workshops. We can make our workshops more playful and engaging. We used to think that our workshop was playful just because the content was playful. Now we think that we can push our participants even further. Make them think even harder and play with wild ideas.

What elements need to be at play to not only create such a safe learning zone but also a platform to think practically about the application in one's own context? How was it possible that the gap between the anxious/unknown was filled so quickly with feelings of safety and believing in one's capabilities? We think that the PZC 2019 was a deeply playful experience. We experienced the learning as an inherently communal effort in which we felt encouraged to lead our learning, explore our wild ideas and support each other in the process. We had a platform to voice our own opinions and make the learning process significant for our personal contexts.

We hope to mirror this learning process in our own workshops. We anticipate creating a space that will be filled with curiosity and wonder. Not only do we want to introduce the indicators and practices of playful learning, but we hope that from this workshop, educators will aspire to nurture critical thinking and creativity in their own school and work environments.

Arguably the most important lesson we learned at PZC 2019 is that **for our**



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young learners to be playful, we as adults need to have a wild and playful mind first.

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August 26, 2019

Vivian Paley: In Memoriam

Ben Mardell

Last month the world lost a brilliant educator, wise person, and friend of children and childhood. Vivian Paley is best known through her books (*White Teacher*, *Wally's Stories*, *The Boy Who Would Be A Helicopter*, *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*), the majority set in her early childhood classrooms at the University of Chicago Lab School. To my knowledge, Vivian is the only early childhood educator or classroom teacher to receive a MacArthur Fellowship (Genius Grant). Her storytelling/story acting technique is used around the world. Her explanations about the role of play in early childhood classrooms is compelling. Others, notably Patsy Cooper in *The Classroom All Young Children Need*, have written about Vivian's contribution to the field. Here I want to share a story—I think Vivian would have appreciated this medium—that illustrates her wisdom and kindness.

In 2013, at the age of 80, Vivian came to Boston. She spent the day speaking to the city's public-school preschool and kindergarten teachers: 400 in the morning and 250 in the afternoon. Her talks centered on storytelling/story acting, which were being introduced in the schools at the time and continue to be part of the K2 and 2nd grade curriculum today.



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To help teachers understand storytelling/story acting, where a child dictates a story to an adult and then the adult helps a group of children act out the story, Vivian facilitated demonstrations with 15 children she was meeting for the first time. These sessions were magical, as the children quickly forgot there was an audience and entered the space of story and play.

After saying goodbye to the children, Vivian answered teachers' questions about the method. Her response to a question about violent themes in young children's stories illustrates the depth of her thinking about teaching, learning, and the human condition. She explained:

Boys have a very, very profound need--as did Shakespeare apparently--to act out pictures of violence. [Children need to] understand that these are characters in a story, [that] they do not control you....How does a child get to understand that the ninja turtle who kicks--does that mean that he, the storyteller, when he acts out a ninja turtle story, must kick the enemy? No! It means that he, the ninja turtle character, must learn the stage rules for how to pretend the scene. **The stage rules.** What are the stage rules in the preschool and kindergarten and 1st grade classroom? Number one: if a character has, as one of his characteristics, kicking, you must be a leg



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length away from the other character you are kicking. In the case of arm jabs, an arm length away (clearly, if you have short arms it's an advantage). Stage rules! What do stage rules do, like all good classroom rules? Do they detract from the activity? No! They make the activity more important. This is important enough to succeed; to have a set of rules. And you practice the rules.

If your story is important enough to have stage rules, you learn them....It is a profession we enter. It's the profession of theater. Theater and story have more rules than your math lesson does. Because the rules take hold of the imagination.

Your own imagination has no bounds. You are not telling the children: oh, how could you tell a story like that? ... We learn quickly how to put things into fiction and then literature emerges. Literature that helps us express our deepest fears, and not to feel they are wrong but show us how they can be presented according to the customs of the times...



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Vivian's entire answer, as well as her thoughts about storytelling/story acting with special needs children, and



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allowing young children to tell and write stories that adults characterize as fictional, can be found [here](#).

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What I remember most from that day took place as I was bringing Vivian back to her hotel (an honor I relished). Driving through Boston, Vivian brought up an interaction that had taken place during the question/answer section in the afternoon session. The first question had come from a person whose speech pattern was non-linear. Rambling, the questioner first expressed disappointment that there was no place to put her coffee, and continued to explain that she worried that the children might have been nervous being in front of so many adults. Vivian had asked the questioner what *she* felt about the storytelling/story acting session, as it was clear to Vivian that the children quickly became immersed in the activity. The questioner admitted that she had left the room and not seen the activity. I could feel my Boston Public School colleagues, the hosts of the event, sink down in their seats in embarrassment.

Vivian asked me if I remember the questioner and then queried, “Was I kind enough?” I explained that I thought she was extremely kind, but Vivian was not convinced. She mused, “I think she wasn’t comfortable. I hope I was kind.”

There are many lessons we should take from Vivian Paley and her work. Asking, “*Am I being kind enough*” is certainly one of these.



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September 11, 2019

Playful learning with older kids

Ben Mardell

Many people's association with playful learning involves young children. They acknowledge that learning through play has an important role in preschool and kindergarten, and maybe even first and second grade. But in middle and high school? Not so much.

Yet we know that the elements of play and playfulness—agency, curiosity, and the joy of learning—are just as important for older learners. So I was delighted that at this summer's [Project Zero Classroom](#), when I asked a group of 100 educators to share an example of playful learning from their classrooms, three middle and high school teachers raised their hands. Here is what they shared:

De'sa Fuller teaches 8th grade social studies at the Gardner Newman Middle School, part of the Troup County, Georgia public schools. To launch an investigation of the Declaration of Independence she pretended that she had found a letter and read it to her class. The letter was in the form of a "Dear John" break up note, with a salutation, a list of grievances, and a signature. After discussing the letter, she revealed that the form of the



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letter was taken from a document created by Thomas Jefferson et al. Surprised and intrigued, her learners were curious to learn more about the Declaration.

Gili Sherman teaches art at the Bernard Zell Anshe Amet Day School, a Jewish, Pre-K through 8th grade school in Chicago. She described a lesson that was part of a 5th grade unit on Henri Matisse, in which a goal was to understand how an obstacle can lead to creative problem-solving and innovation (late in his life, Matisse lost much of his fine motor skills). She asked her students to take off their shoes and challenged them to draw a flower with one of their feet. With a sharpie marker between their toes, there was much laughter as the students struggled to draw in this unusual manner. Gili then discussed with students how it felt for them to be limited in this way, and how Matisse must have felt to lose the ability to draw with his hands. In their end of year reflections, students referenced this experience as one of the highlights of art class, naming how they were better able to imagine how Matisse felt.



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Coco Lawton teaches at the Nelson Mandela Magnet School, a public, grade 7 through 12 International Baccalaureate school in Santa Fe, New Mexico. As part of a 10th grade language and literature course, students engaged with 17th century French playwright Molière's classic *Tartuffe*. *Tartuffe* themes of love, the duties of parents and children, and religious hypocrisy, are all relevant to 21st century American teenagers. The play is also difficult to engage in. Coco has her students act out short sections of the play with playful parameters: 1) a person has to be part of the set; 2) only two actors on the stage at a time; and, 3) audience members must pick the most important word in the scene and shout it out. These playful provocations helped students dig deeper into the text (e.g., picking one word to shout had students debating what was the heart of a scene). With a greater ownership over the text, Coco's students were able to write confidently and eloquently about the play and its themes.

These brief descriptions do not do justice to the richness of the curricula offered by De'sa, Gili, and Coco. My hope in sharing their examples is to expand our associations with playful learning beyond early childhood to



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include 5th, 8th, and 10th grade, and everything in between.

To learn more about these three teachers and their lessons, please feel free to contact them directly:

- De'sa at fullerdj@troup.org
- Gili at michelegilisherman@gmail.com
- Coco at courtney.lawton@mandelainternationalschool.us



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October 11, 2019

PoP practices: a request for help

Ben Mardell

When PoP researcher Jen Ryan proposed this blog, I was skeptical. As neither a consumer nor producer of blog content, I was unsure how useful the endeavor would be. Jen's argument -- that the blog would be a sandbox of sorts where the PoP team could play with ideas -- convinced me. She was right; the blog has been a great way for our team and valued colleagues to test, explore, and share ideas regarding learning through play in schools.

In the spirit of play -- of exploring and taking risks -- I am asking for help. Through our research, we've created a set of [core principles](#), a model of indicators of playful learning for the [International School of Billund](#) and one for [three schools in South Africa](#), and an approach for educators to explore a new teacher-research methodology we call [Playful Participatory Research](#). We are now working on a set of key PoP practices -- it is here we're looking for help.

How should we organize our practices in a way that will be most helpful to educators? One option (Option A) is a bit poetic and is more descriptive of the practices; the other (Option B) is perhaps more pragmatic, framing the practices around the kinds of tasks and decisions educators make every day.



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Whichever version we land on will include, for each practice: 1) a set of concrete strategies, 2) examples of these strategies in action, and 3) tools that will help educators implement these strategies.

So here goes:

Option A:

Enable learners to lead their own learning

Establish conditions to explore ideas together

Engage the imagination

Encourage experimentation and risk-taking

Embrace the range of emotions play involves

Option B:

Design playful learning experiences

Cultivate playful classroom and school cultures

Provide playful assessments

Construct playful places



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I realize it might be difficult for you to evaluate Option A and Option B without a sense of these strategies, examples, and tools. Fret not! We've created a document that fleshes the two options out in more detail. If you're game, we'd be happy to send the document to you to look over (should take about 10 minutes to read) in exchange for your feedback.

Though we don't have comments enabled on this blog, click the Contact tab on the left. We'll field responses and will send out the document to those who ask! Welcome to the sandbox!

Playfully yours,

Ben Mardell



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October 29, 2019

The Power of Playful Learning

Last week, four floors down from the PoP club house (as we fondly call our office space at [Project Zero](#)), our team gathered in Askwith Hall to attend a panel called **The Power of Playful Learning**. Part of the [Askwith Forum](#) -- a series of public lectures at the Harvard Graduate School of Education that focus on important topics in education - this particular panel brought together friends and thought leaders in the field of play and learning:

**[Susan Harris MacKay](#),
pedagogical director of the
Museum Center for Learning and
Opal School at [Portland
Children's Museum](#)**

**[Bo Stjerne Thomsen](#), vice-
president and chair of Learning
through Play at the [LEGO
Foundation](#)**

**[Lynneth Solis](#), senior research
manager at Project Zero (and PoP
researcher)**

**[Jack Shonkoff](#), director of the
[Center on the Developing Child](#) at
Harvard University**



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from left: Ben, Susan, Bo,
Lynneth, Jack

Moderated by PoP's own Ben Mardell, the panelists considered the role of play in education; pivotal moments or stories from their work; whether playful learning is appropriate for all children; and if, in these serious times, play is what we really need. They shared stories from the classroom, noted systemic movements around play and learning, impressed upon us the importance of considering cultural context when thinking and talking about play, and reminded us that empathy and collaborative skills are as hard wired as any other skills to be promoted in school. Serious topics addressed by a playful panel!

The Forum was live-streamed and can now be found [online](#). Check it out!



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November 8, 2019

Let's Play! Online Course Open for Registration

Jen Ryan

Those of you following our blog may remember that back in [July](#) we shared an exciting development on our project – the launch of an online Pedagogy of Play course. Ben and I developed and ran that first course last spring and were so grateful to the many participants for helping us build an online community around playful learning. Well, here's to more excitement!

The current run of Let's Play: Teaching Strategies for Playful Learning is now [open for registration](#). Once again, we will be offering a dip into some core principles, practices, and strategies for bringing playful learning into school contexts. Key questions will include:

What does learning through play look and feel like?

How can a shared understanding of learning through play enhance a learning experience?

How can educators create conditions in which playful learning can thrive?

Discussion will consider the opportunities and challenges of incorporating play into the classroom and will draw on teacher-researcher



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practices developed through the Pedagogy of Play research initiative at Project Zero and partnering educators in Denmark and South Africa. Along the way, we'll consider illustrations from classroom practice and engage in some playful activities.

The course is designed for teams -- we recommend that team participants work at the same school or organization, but if you don't have a team we can create a 'virtual' team for you. Scholarships are available for those working with low-income populations.

Ready to experiment, wonder, play, and learn? Join us!



The outside classroom at International School of Billund



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November 22, 2019

Aligning message and medium: playful teaching for playful learning

Jen Ryan

How to open a national seminar aimed at exploring playful teaching and learning in schools? With a group song, of course:



IMG_6037

Jennifer Ryan

A few weeks ago, about 60 professors and leaders from all of Denmark's professional colleges -- institutions training the next generation of educators -- gathered in Vejle, Denmark for the [Playful Learning Seminar](#). They were continuing a multi-year exploration of the role playful learning has in inspiring creative and curious students. At the same time, this initiative provides a space for educators and partnering researchers from [LEGO Foundation](#) to reflect on the value of aligning medium and message: if playful learning is a goal, then playful teaching ought to be a pathway to that goal. Move over, PowerPoints.



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PoP researcher Ben Mardell embraces a playful opener that set the tone for the Seminar

If you've been following this blog, you'll know that our research project is focused not just on learning through play, but on a *pedagogy of play*. We think about what it means to have a whole school playful culture -- whole school communities that embrace play at all levels of decision making: in hiring and on-boarding new teachers; in evaluating policies and rules; in finding opportunities for playfulness in curricula, professional development, parent-teacher conferences, hallway transitions, and even assessments.

Introducing playfulness in schools can happen one moment or classroom at a time. But effecting and sustaining change often requires a more systemic approach. Teacher training provides a great avenue for this. The Playful Learning Seminar is designed in a cascade model, where participants are ambassadors, experimenting and exploring with playful learning and design, returning to their colleges to test out ideas, and coming back together to



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reflect with researchers and colleagues. It's a kind of playful participatory research that holds a lot of parallels to our work.

We were delighted to be invited to the November Seminar, where [Ben](#) and our teacher-researcher partners from [International School of Billund](#) (Charlotte Andersen, Deputy Head of School, and Ole Stahlfest, Middle Years Science and Design teacher) presented our research and some emergent ideas. We shared pictures of practice that illustrate playful learning. We shared strategies (more on this coming soon!) for in-service and pre-service teachers to begin thinking about incorporating play as an approach to their teaching. And together we considered the importance of adopting an inquiry stance and playful mindset when teaching, so that learning goals for students align with teaching practices.

At the close of our session, we asked participants to brainstorm some exercises for bringing more playful teaching into their classes. They shared ideas and, as one participant explained, left thinking about how to model experiences so that students get a feeling that “we are here together, learning together...we need to surprise each other.”

As an observer of this session, I was particularly taken with this idea of surprise. We've come to understand that surprise can be an element of learning through play. But what might it mean to have authentic moments of surprise for the teacher as well? What does it mean to have the inclination to teach playfully,



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and how might this be cultivated? Where are the opportunities for teachers to take risks and to experiment? I suspect this may be fodder for future blog posts. And maybe we should all open more learning experiences with a song.



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December 6, 2019

Faces of joy through playful learning with diverse intellectual abilities

Erika Lusky, guest author

Erika has worked for 25 years with students from elementary to post-secondary education in the area of Special Education, and is currently a Speech-Language Pathologist, Instructor, and Coach. She is passionate about creating quality relationships to foster agency and identity, specifically in disenfranchised learners. Erika is a thought partner and friend of Project Zero, instructing PZ-HGSE online courses and facilitating courses and study groups for our Summer Institute.



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**Facial expressions of
intense joy and pain are
indistinguishable – so**

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how do we know for sure what's happening here? Welcome to our little world and I'll explain.



Act 1 (photo Erika Lusky)

Our little world exists in a public high school in Rochester, Michigan, and includes 15-18 year old students with developmental delays, teachers, paraprofessionals, and peer mentors. Peer mentors are general education high school students who have signed up for an elective course to assist and model positive communication, socialization, participation, and behavior strategies to support the engagement of students with



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developmental delays -- students who are are non verbal or limited language communicators. Students with limited language have access to an augmentative communication device to assist or supplement their spoken language.

As a Speech-Language Pathologist, I began to wonder how we might build knowledge and skills without a conversation. Embedded in my thinking of our expectations for students (see [Creating a Culture of Thinking](#) for more about this), I further wondered how we might set the agenda to encourage independence, perseverance, and curiosity. I was intrigued by The Pedagogy of Play (PoP) project and was curious if we might achieve these goals through playful learning? I questioned: Do you need a formal event to initiate play? Does it need to be celebratory or ritual? I considered the conditions for learning with and from others. I decided to use the space and materials in our newly designed school maker space (inspired by [Agency by Design](#)) to support this exploration.

In our maker space, we were engaging in an activity to promote language acquisition and use. The prompt was to create something that could talk. Some students created small creatures out of yarn; others chose to make a flag with paper towel tubes and recycled material.



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Students dressing their voice (photos Tarra Dodge)



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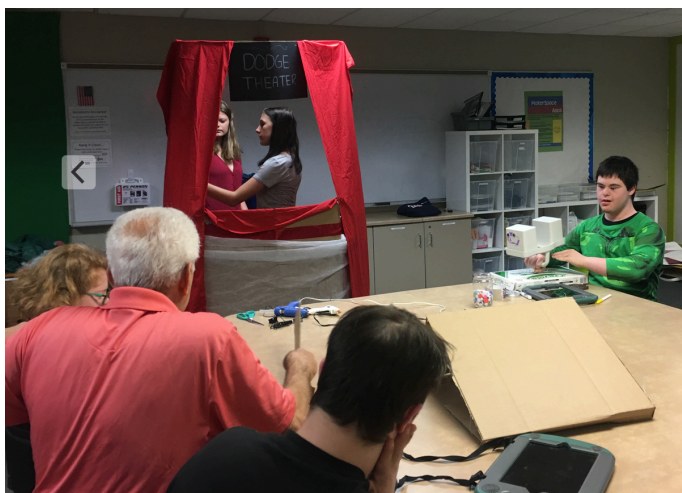
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Requesting to lead (photo Erika Lusky)

A particular student began to create a puppet and the idea spread quickly. Several students began to make unique hand puppets. Their peer mentors noticed their interest in hand puppets and very quickly began to build a puppet theatre featuring the classroom teacher's name. "Dodge Theatre" was later taken back to their class for further exploration.



Peer mentors preparing the stage (photo Erika Lusky)

While students had the autonomy and choice to create and suggest their own imaginative elements, this playful experience provided a bridge for the students across a variety of abilities to



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be a part of each other's game. Before you knew it, one at a time the students with limited language went behind the stage, alongside a peer mentor, and put on a show for the group. The language that came from these students that day was like nothing I've ever witnessed before. These students went on to transfer their "speaking" the next class period, with two teachers observing an increase in language and engagement.

Our students don't always interact directly or emotionally with one another. During this experience, rather than seeing their peer mentors as a 'helping' resource, students felt friendship and belonging. Playful learning provided these students the opportunity to see the contributions of others and understand points of view in a slightly different way than through a conversation. Playful learning provided these students with the lessons of cooperation and give and take that we hope to see in the world. Playful learning brought back the excitement of learning with a contagious enthusiasm. We saw sparks of joy that invigorates the soul and promotes a happy and healthy life.

I wonder how else we might support and engage with these specific learners? I wonder how I might prime for playful learning for this diverse population and others in the future?



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December 20, 2019

Anticipating a playful break

As 2019 comes to an end, we anticipate that many of you will have a break from work. We hope these breaks are restful and playful. And we note that anticipation is one of the important pleasures of play. Looking forward to participating in play and imagining seeing some of our favorite people to play with can be almost as exciting as the reality that follows.

Interestingly, this anticipation seems to take place on a neural level and has important implications for learning. The LEGO Foundation's [*Neuroscience and learning through play: a review of the evidence*](#) (co-authored by team member Lynne Solis) notes fMRI studies that find, "the more we anticipate a positive outcome the more the activity of these brain structures enhance our ability to retain information that follows." The report also notes that even small changes in the environment can inspire anticipation of what is to come, and in doing so prime "the brain to retain information more effectively." It seems like getting learners into playful mindsets – anticipating that school learning activities will be opportunities for enjoyment and delight – is a good way to enhance learning.

So what are we looking forward to? As we near the one year anniversary of our blog, we wanted to take this opportunity to (re)introduce the PoP team by



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sharing something each of us is
anticipating during our winter break.



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Katie Ertel

As I anticipate the upcoming winter break, it is playful to think of having time for many of the things I find get lost in the daily shuffle of life: a look at the winter tide pools by the ocean, planning for and experimenting with new recipes for dinner, cleaning a closet. And of course, more snow please! We've been lucky to have three snowfalls already this season, though I know many who are not happy about this. Of course, what's playful to one is not always playful to another...



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Siyuan Fan (HGSE student researcher)

It is playful enough just to think about this coming winter break since it is my first break here in Boston and there are so many places I would like to explore in the city. The museums are on my list: The Museum of Fine Arts, Museum of Science, Boston Children's Museum, etc. In the meantime, I can't wait to spend the week after Christmas with my friends in Florida, during which we will have fun in Disney and the Universal Studios. Although it is not easy to deal with everything when you first come into a city in a foreign country, the team of Pop USA definitely brings joy and warmth to me as I enjoy the last semester and anticipate for 2020.



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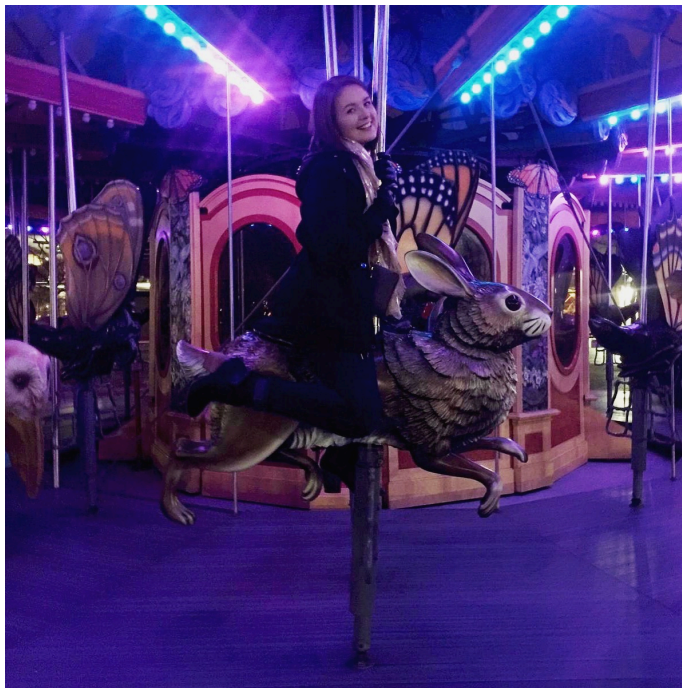
Mara Krechevsky

I'm looking forward to going to New York City to see plays and musicals with my daughter, playing games in houses with friends, and reading a book of fiction (if I'm lucky).



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Samantha Levangie (HGSE student researcher)

This break, I will be spending a lot of time with my family. I'm looking forward to spending time with my young cousins (there are eight under the age of seven!) and playing games during the holidays. After the new year, I'll be taking my first overseas trip to London by myself. Exploring new cities is always a playful experience for me. I love learning more about history and art by visiting museums, and it's always fun to walk the streets in an unfamiliar place and imagine what life might look like if I lived there.





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Ben Mardell

I am looking forward to sharing PoP ideas with 800 educators in Beijing on the 23rd (yes, work can feel playful), and then visiting my son Sam in Boulder, Colorado. Sam and I will certainly go on some hikes. We both find being out in the snow—something they have a lot of in Colorado right now--very playful.



Jen Ryan (*photo courtesy of Tom Fisher*)



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The first few days of break will be spent working our way



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through the final rounds of college applications with our son (anxiety and anticipation for sure...though maybe not so playful). And then we'll pack up – me, my husband, our 10 and 17 year olds, and a station wagon full of winter gear – for a ski trip with my brother and his family. Looking forward to cold, fresh days outside (though unlike the picture, this time a chairlift will bring me up the mountain) followed by evenings of tea, books, dogs, and chats by the fire.



Lynneth Solis

I'm looking forward to playdates with my nieces (a one-year-old and a four-year-old). I'm spending part of December and January in my hometown of El Centro, CA, and I'm planning on visiting my sister and her daughters every day. We already have a long list of activities planned: visits to the park to ride bikes and run



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around; pretend ballet performances to the tunes of The Nutcracker; building structures with their favorite magnetic wooden blocks; reading new books in Spanish and English; and much more. I can't wait!

Anticipating a productive, challenging, and hopefully more peaceful 2020, we will be back with a new post in early January. Happy holidays, however you celebrate!



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January 10, 2020

PoP USA: Playful learning in a new context

Katie Ertel & Lynneth Solis

One of the Pedagogy of Play core beliefs is that learning through play is universal and shaped by culture.

Although children (and adults) around the world can learn through play, the nature of their play is shaped by cultural priorities and practices. In our research with educators and students at the International School of Billund in Denmark and in three diverse schools in South Africa, we have explored how they describe and practice playful learning in their context, and how our findings in these different settings relate to existing research. Together with these educators, we have identified specific indicators of playful learning that speak to their local educational experiences. We believe that working with schools to surface local expressions of playful learning is critical in honoring educators' and students' voices as they make sense of their playful learning experiences. This academic year, we are excited to be working in yet another context, in our own backyard. **PoP is at play in the United States!**

With a research method similar to the one we used in South Africa, we aim to find out what playful learning looks and feels like in schools in the U.S. In South Africa, we developed a qualitative research approach to investigate what



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playful learning felt and looked like across three schools. We worked to understand the academic and cultural context at each school and created a model of playful learning indicators (i.e., Ownership, Curiosity, and Enjoyment) based on classroom observations, teacher and principal interviews, and student focus groups.

In the U.S., we have begun working with several schools in the Boston area, conducting classroom observations and interviewing teachers and school leaders. We are already catching a glimpse of what playful learning might be possible in U.S. schools:

Suzie is a second grade teacher in a local public school. We recently spent a few hours in her classroom when students were working on pieces that addressed the question, “Why would someone like to live on your imaginary island?” The students had created maps of their own islands, using their knowledge of different landforms, water formations, biomes, and climates they had learned about in prior science units, and were now working to prepare a brochure to welcome people to their island and persuade them to visit. The assignment included a checklist of tasks that needed to be completed as part of the project, as well as optional tasks, such as creating a postcard of the island.



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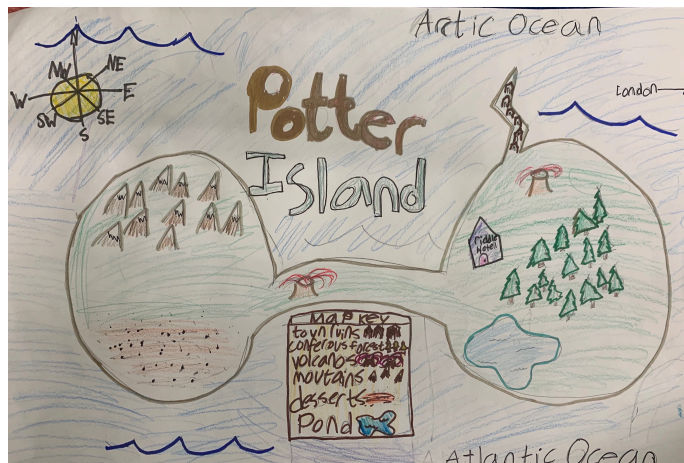
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One student's island

After Suzie led a short opening for the lesson, students worked independently for the remaining 45 minutes of the period. The students worked individually and in pairs, choosing where in the classroom to sit—at tables, sprawled on the floor, in floor chairs with lap desks. Some worked on computers to type their island description, while others worked on their draft on paper. The noise in the room varied from relatively quiet to an excited buzz. Some students hummed and sang as they worked.

Suzie and her intern, Mary, supported student-directed learning, giving students freedom and choice, while occasionally redirecting them. Students conferred with each other about their work and asked questions of the teachers. There were smiles and some laughter too, and of course, occasional comments or side conversations. What stood out in this period, however, was students' engagement in their work and the freedom they had while keeping on task.



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My Island Project Checklist	
Work	Date Completed
My Island Map First Draft	12-10-19
My Island Map Success Checklist	12-10-19
My Final Draft Island Map	12-10-20
My Brochure Writing Graphic Organizer	12-10-19
My Brochure Writing Draft	12-20
My Brochure Rubric	1-2-20
My Final Draft Brochure Writing	1-2-20
3 Advertisements for Activities in Brochure	12-10-19
My 3D Island in Clay	
Optional Work	Date Completed
Postcard from your Island	
Narrative Story about visiting your Island	
Fun Facts	12-16-2019
My Island Song	

Island project checklist

Both the topic and the manner in which students engaged with the assignment felt playful. Students had the opportunity to use their imaginations and think creatively about what could be on an island, while using knowledge related to the learning goals of the project. They exercised their self-regulation and executive function skills as they planned their writing and focused on the assignment, while working in a flexible and comfortable class environment. And this was all in service of employing their science knowledge and practicing their writing skills.

The playful learning we observed in Suzie's classroom appeared to be promoted by both, the engaging activity of creating an imaginary island and an encouraging classroom culture with clear routines and supportive structures. We look forward to delving more deeply into this interplay between assignments and classroom structures in playful learning, in Suzie's classroom and in other classrooms around the Boston area.



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Do you want to climb mountains? is hiking a thing for you? How about volcanoes? Then come to Potter Island, the island of your dreams. Located off the coast of London, it sits in the calm waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Perfect for swimming! In my opinion, a lifetime will never be complete without climbing the Granger Mountains or hiking and observing the Weasley Woods. In addition you can climb Mount Malfoy and discover wondrous things at the Lestranger Ruins. Rent the hotel and go there every day! Take a hike across Longbottom Desert and take a dip in the refreshing waves. Or have you stuck your head in Mount Crabbe and checked that it isn't jinxed? If that doesn't satisfy you, you can spot all kinds of fish in Riddle Pond. Clams, clownfish, you name it! So come, be anyone, and have the magical experience of a lifetime at Potter island!

*One student's typed
island brochure text*



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January 26, 2020

Water balloons, algebra, and play

Tom Fisher, guest author

Tom Fisher has been an educator for 21 years. He currently teaches middle school at a small, independent school in Portland, Maine (USA). His favorite moments as a teacher are when students start working on concepts that seem unapproachable or too difficult, get started, find some momentum, and come to conclusions and understandings they once thought were beyond their abilities.

One of the main goals of Algebra I is learning how to balance equations, taking an equation and rearranging it so that it is in its most useful form. One of the semi-magical things you can do by balancing equations is to illuminate and quantify hidden relationships. For example, there is clearly a mathematical relationship between how far an object falls and how long it is in the air. A baseball dropped off a two hundred foot cliff will be in the air longer than the same baseball dropped off of a ten foot cliff. When I first started teaching Algebra I wanted to create a fun, challenging assignment in which struggle was normal and success was exciting. I wanted students to not only get practice with balancing equations and with persevering, but to glimpse a bit of the magic of mathematics.

This led to the now annual water balloon drop.



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The whole school community looks on as Tom explains the exercise (*photo Stephanie Davis, courtesy [Breakwater School](#)*)

In this assignment I run parallel to the base of our main school building at a speed that is as constant as I can make it. My students are lying on the edge of the roof approximately thirty five feet above. They are armed with water balloons which they try to drop on my head, one at a time, as I run by.



Students prepare to launch as David (head of school) and Mr. J (teacher) offer support and safety constraints (*photo Stephanie Davis, courtesy [Breakwater School](#)*)

Their challenge is to draw a line on the ground we call the drop line. They drop their balloons when I cross the drop line. They are not allowed to time falling objects from the roof. Figuring out how far the line should be from the point of impact requires a lot of creative thought and practice with balancing equations.



Please scroll to the end of this post for a full explanation of the math involved

Over the years this event has become a school tradition. Kids from preschool to eighth grade come out to watch, chanting, “Get him wet! Get him wet!” as each algebra student takes their turn.



Liam anticipates the drop (*photo Stephanie Davis, courtesy [Breakwater School](#)*)

Dropping water balloons on your teacher, being on the roof, and having an audience are all obviously aspects of play that make the event fun and lead to motivated students who are excited for their chance. However, I think it’s easy to overlook the other very important aspect of play at work. The students know that this math is quite difficult. The difficulty, and the time given to dealing with that difficulty, allows the students let go of expectations and to seek a positive outcome rather than trying to avoid a negative one (being wrong). Play is about seeking the positive and, because of play, they



can approach this difficult task with excitement rather than dread.

Subconsciously, when I first started teaching math, I think I saw playful learning in math as a good way of challenging my strongest math students. These students got great satisfaction from finding hidden relationships between numbers or from starting with something messy and turning it into something simple. There were of course students who struggled with, or even feared math, as well as students who were “good” at traditional math focused on computation, but who wanted nothing to do with the less black and white world of playful learning.

But it doesn't take a lot of time as a math teacher to realize that your primary job is not to make sure that a student can divide fractions or to be able to write an equation in slope intercept form. I'm not downplaying the importance of these skills. **As teachers we have a responsibility to the children in our classes to make sure they are ready to confidently learn and apply what they have learned after they leave our classrooms. But the importance of these skills is secondary to the importance of developing a tolerance for confusion and a belief in our own abilities to solve puzzles.** Math happens to be a great place to work on developing comfort with not instantly seeing the answer, with trying approaches even if you don't know they will work, and with developing a methodical way of working through complex ideas.

As a young teacher it became pretty obvious that the biggest difference between the students who felt confident in math versus the students who struggled or who craved predictability was that the students who felt confident *explored* math, while the students who struggled or limited themselves were simply trying to avoid being wrong. Which is the cause and which is the effect is hard to say, but the longer I taught the more obvious it became that a key to teaching math was to create an atmosphere in which finding the correct answer is not always the normal, expected outcome. Unintentionally I think we often create the idea





that there is only correct, which is neutral to faintly good, and incorrect, which is clearly bad.

I started to see the importance of discovery and confusion, in which struggle is neutral and finding a solution is celebratory. It became clear that while the strongest students might do this more easily, the students who were afraid of being wrong needed this approach even more.

It's important to say that one of the disservices we do each other as teachers is to describe scenes of glowing excitement and to act like this is how our classrooms always work. This is not only dishonest, but has the effect of leaving many teachers questioning what they are doing wrong and why their classrooms are not these idealized sanctuaries of enthusiasm. Discovery and confusion do not work without a strong understanding of basic concepts. And while I do tend to believe that it is almost always better to structure learning in a manner that allows children to discover concepts rather than learning from direct instruction, this is not always flashy and can be quite mundane. But these more basic lessons can lead to math play, where struggle is normal and success exhilarating. And this is how we develop mathematical thinkers.



Full disclosure from me - Jen, your friendly blog manager - Tom is a current teacher at my daughter's school. We were lucky to have had him teach my son for three years...and have experienced this water balloon exercise first hand. He's kind of a rock star in our family.

Mathematical Explanation in Plain English

One of the things we emphasize throughout middle school math is the idea of explaining a problem using plain English before trying to apply any computation. In regards to the challenge of figuring out where to place the drop line this seems like a straightforward problem. Distance equals rate times time. For example, if you imagine a car traveling at 40 MPH (rate), and it travels for 2 hours (time), it will travel 80 miles (distance). Forty times two equals eighty. So, if they know my rate and they know how long the balloon will take to drop from their hand to a spot 5'8" (my height) above the ground, they can just multiply those to find out how far away from the impact spot they should make the drop line.

However, two things complicate the problem. The first is reaction time. There is a lag between when our brain notices it's time to drop the balloon and when our fingers let go. It's about 0.19 seconds for most of us. We figure this out in class and average the class's reaction time, but it is always close to 0.19 seconds. The other, which is much more difficult to figure out, is figuring out how long the balloon will be in the air. Students were allowed to measure the height of the building, but not allowed to time how long it takes an object to fall off of the building. This is particularly tricky to figure out because a falling object does not have a steady speed. It continuously accelerates until it hits.



The Mathematics of the Explanation

Because we are trying to figure out the time that the balloon will be in the air, we start with the formula that time = distance divided by rate.

$$T = \frac{D}{R}$$

We know the distance, so all we have to figure out is the rate. The problem is that there is no constant rate. The balloon will accelerate as it drops. To get around this we can think of rate as average rate. After all, a car that travels 20 MPH for 10 minutes and then travels at 40 MPH for ten minutes, goes the same distance in 20 minutes as a car that travels 30 MPH the whole way. So all we have to figure out is the average rate.

But how do we know the average rate? This is a little tricky. Because the balloon accelerates smoothly rather than in stops and starts, there is some moment during its drop when it is traveling at its average speed. When it is higher than this spot, it is going slower than the average speed. When it has fallen below this spot it is traveling faster than its average speed. The crude diagram below might help picture the balloon's speed as it falls. Letters and numbers in black show speeds slower than the average. Red shows the average speed and blue shows speeds faster than the average.

- avg. speed -5 - Top of the building
- avg. speed -4
- avg. speed -3
- avg. speed -2
- avg. speed -1
- avg. speed
- avg. speed +1
- avg. speed +2
- avg. speed +3
- avg. speed +4
- avg. speed +5 - Impact



Imagine that the average speed is 5 (the units don't matter in this hypothetical example). Notice that the initial speed would be 0 and the top speed (maximum velocity or Vmax) would be 10. Therefore the average speed would be



half of the top speed. This will always be true. So if you can find the top speed, you can find the average speed. It will be the top speed divided by 2.

So now we just need to find the top speed. Well that's just a matter of multiplying G (this is acceleration due to gravity which is 9.8 meters/ second squared or 9.8m/ s²) by how long the balloon will be in the air (time or T). But we don't know time! This is where you would be stuck without algebra. But let's try writing it all out.

$$T = \frac{D}{R}$$

We know R (rate) is Vmax (Maximum speed) divided by 2. So we can write:

$$T = \frac{D}{V_{max}/2}$$

If you cast your mind back to middle school math you will remember that when you divide by a fraction you multiply by its reciprocal.

$$T = D \times \frac{2}{V_{max}} = \frac{2D}{V_{max}}$$

We know the Vmax is G times T

$$T = \frac{2D}{GT}$$

If you cast your mind back to pre-algebra you may remember that you can do anything you want to one side of an equation as long as you do it to both sides of the equation. In this case we will multiply both sides of the equation by T.



$$T \times T = \frac{2D}{GT} \times T$$

When you simplify this and cancel out you get

$$T^2 = \frac{2D}{G}$$

But we don't want to know what T squared is, we want to know T. So once again, we perform an operation on both sides of the equation. In this case we take the square root of both sides. Unfortunately the computer does not like to put exponents or fractions under a square root sign. But after you take the square root of both sides you end up with:

T (time it takes the water balloon to fall) equaling the square root of $\frac{2D}{G}$

We measured the distance from the top of the roof to my head (D) and we know that falling objects accelerate at 9.8 meters/ second² (G). So we now have enough information to find T, the amount of time the balloon will be in the air. We then add 0.19 seconds for reaction time and we know how much time should elapse between when a student's brain tells their hand to drop the balloon and when the balloon will be at the height of my head. Because they have timed my rate of speed, and I have calibrated my speed to the expected rate, they can figure out how far away to place the drop line.



February 14, 2020

Key practices for playful learning

From the onset of our research we have been investigating teaching practices and strategies that promote cultures of playful learning in classrooms and schools. If the indicators of playful learning describe the *what* of playful learning, the practices and teaching strategies describe the *how*. Our aim is to map out generative and actionable teaching practices that are accessible and inspirational for educators from early childhood through middle school (and perhaps even beyond). Our theory-building process draws on:

Teacher research conducted by study groups of educators at the [International School of Billund](#) (Denmark)

Classroom observations and interviews with educators at [Esikhisini Primary](#), [Nova Pioneer Ormando](#) and [Bryandale](#) schools in South Africa as well as the International School of Billund

A review of innovative pedagogies, including the work of educators from [Reggio Emilia](#) (Italy), [Opal School](#) (Portland, Oregon, USA), [Anji Play](#) (China), other Project Zero research (e.g., [Making Learning](#)





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Visible project and Agency
byDesign), and work by other
educators around the world

Using a lens of play and playfulness, we are mapping the terrain of playful learning practices. Feedback from colleagues, including readers of this blog, is invaluable in our iterative process. As we continue to play with ideas and engage in further research (including our current work in the US), the organization of these practices very well may change and/or additional strategies will likely be added. Below is the current version of our ideas.

A pedagogy of play involves bringing play and playfulness into many aspects of school life: teaching, learning, assessment, the physical environment, and school culture. We have identified **five core practices** (with associated teaching strategies to come in future blog posts) to promote a sense of choice and ownership, curiosity and wonder, and delight and enjoyment in student learning. Often deployed in combination, the PoP practices include:

Enable experimentation and risk-taking

Evolutionary biologists believe that play evolved to provide a safe way to try out new behaviors and ideas. School exists, in part, as a safe place for children to experiment, make mistakes, and learn from failure. How do we promote mindsets where children relish trying out ideas and not give up when the going gets hard?



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Establish the conditions for learning with one another

Feelings of playful learning are often activated and sustained by being part of a group. Playful learning is enhanced when players exchange, build on, or disagree with each other's ideas. Structure activities with social components to enrich learning.

Engage the imagination to explore ideas

Engaging the imagination brings students into the what if space of learning. Here, learners explore, create and invent, generate new ideas, and take different perspectives.

Encourage learners to lead their own learning

Taking playful learning seriously means tipping the balance of responsibility for learning toward learners. Look for opportunities to turn things over to students, letting them make appropriate decisions about important aspects of learning, and at the same time, supporting them in this process. This involves making plans and a willingness to modify plans.

Embrace the range of emotions play produces

Play produces a range of emotions: enjoyment, satisfaction and ownership, as well as frustration and even anger. Deep learning involves this same range of emotions. Design learning experiences to elicit a range of emotions. Because what is playful for one isn't necessarily playful for all, strive



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to provide more than one way for students to learn playfully.



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*photos courtesy International School of
Billund*

Over the next few months we will be sharing further thoughts about these practices, including introducing the associated teaching strategies. *Preview: our next post is about a college professor who uses some of these practices in his introductory calculus course.*



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March 13, 2020

Playful pedagogy in college calculus

Ben Mardell

While playful learning is most often associated with young children, it can be a valuable resource for older learners as well. In previous posts we have shared examples of playful learning in [middle](#) and [high](#) school and for adult learners. What about college?

I've just finished Paul Tough's book *The Years That Matter Most: How College Makes Or Breaks Us*. It is a powerful call to reform American higher education—the admission process and the undergraduate experience. And embedded in it is a story of playful teaching and learning in a college classroom. A calculus class no less.

The teacher is Uri Treisman. Treisman teaches an introductory calculus course at the University of Texas at Austin. In the year Tough chronicles, Ivonne Martinez is in Treisman's class. A first generation college student from San Antonio, Martinez aspires to be a mathematician. For Martinez, Introduction to Calculus is an essential step towards this dream. Martinez starts her first year at college unsure about her abilities, and is, objectively less prepared than many of her classmates who attended high schools with far superior math programs.



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While Treisman does not explicitly call his pedagogy playful, in his mission to make sure all his students succeed, he deploys key playful learning practices that were described in the last [post](#): enabling experimentation and risk-taking; establishing the conditions for learning with one another; encouraging learners to lead their own learning; and embracing the range of emotions play produces (in particular, supporting learners in working through frustration).

How are these practices manifested in a college course? Treisman begins the first class session with music – the Colombian band Monsieur Perine (subsequent classes began with Linda Ronstadt and Copeland’s Fanfare for the Common Man). As the music plays, Treisman circulates among his 100 students, greeting them by name. This first class is a mix of high level calculus and the message:

You are a mathematician. This is hard and you can do it. You belong here.

During the semester Martinez and her classmates are exposed to complex mathematics that go beyond what is typical in Calculus 101. Treisman knows this is stressful and disorienting and explains that, “Almost every student in calculus gets their self-confidence destroyed at some point. I want to be there when they have this crisis.”

As the semester proceeds, Martinez certainly has her crisis. On the first test she scores a 67. Test two: 59. The mid-term is even worse. By mid-semester



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she worries, “Maybe kids from the west side of San Antonio aren’t cut out for calculus.”

Maybe too much disorientation, Treisman wonders. In conversations with his Teaching Assistants (TAs), they conclude that their teaching had fallen out of balance; students were relying too much on the instructors rather than discovering on their own and teaching each other. So Treisman announces that the class is switching to “workshop mode.” In study group sessions Martinez and her classmates work on problems in small groups. TAs explain that students have to come up with their own ideas of how to solve the problems, noting, as way of encouragement, “Rarely the first thing I try is correct. I’m almost always wrong at the beginning... That’s why we use pencils.”

Where do I see playful learning practices in all of this? First, experimentation and risk-taking is enabled: “that’s why we use pencils.” The study groups help establish the conditions for learning with one another and encourage learners to lead their own learning. And in supporting learners to work through their frustration, Treisman and his TAs embrace the range of emotions play produces. This is something that is challenging to figure out how to do well. It is something Treisman does masterfully, so it is worth sharing a conversation he and Martinez had during office hours where he provides lovely support by shifting the burden of learning onto himself, normalizing struggles with calculus, and giving an





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effective pep talk. In part, he tells Martinez:

My problem is that I have a group of students in the class who did advanced AP calculus in junior year and they went to really rigorous high schools. You're going to catch up with them in a few weeks or in a month. But because you always did well, and now you're struggling, you're saying to yourself "maybe I'm not good enough to be here."

The question of how to teach this class so that everyone struggles, without students losing their confidence—this is my struggle. Because you guys are such incredible students. You're really accomplished. You're hardworking and serious. And I have to push you so that you can learn, but I have to get better at making sure you don't come out of this and say, "struggle means I'm not good." We can't lose you. We need more mathematicians. We need more woman mathematicians. And it wouldn't hurt to have more Latina mathematicians.

This support with frustration, along with the help in study group sessions where Martinez begins taking the lead in solving problems, pays off. She starts feeling more confident in her understanding of the material. Martinez



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takes the final exam. It is the end of her first semester at college and that afternoon her parents pick her up. On the drive home she receives this email from Professor Treisman:

I wonder if you understand how talented you are and how that talent is enriched by your amazing work ethic. You earned one of the highest grades on the final—391 out of 400, which is of course, a high A. It was a real privilege to have you in our course.

Enable experimentation and risk-taking. Establish the conditions for learning with one another. Encourage learners to lead their own learning. Embrace the range of emotions play produces. Teaching practices that can be useful in kindergarten through college to foster playful learning. And it doesn't hurt to start class with a song.



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March 21, 2020

Playful Home Learning Series: #1

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, this post is the first in a series about playful teaching and learning during prolonged school closures. That we are talking about play and playfulness during this global crisis doesn't mean we don't take the situation seriously. We are deeply saddened by the ongoing loss of life and toll this outbreak will continue to take. Yet as educators who understand the value of learning through play, we feel a responsibility to help playful learning continue for the many children who will be learning at home.

Playful online learning in 4th grade



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by Ben Mardell

Meredith Peterson is a 4th grade teacher at the Summit School, an independent school in North Carolina. She teaches reading, social studies, and science and is a home room teacher (focused on socio-emotional learning). Jen and I spoke with Meredith on Summit's first day of distance learning. Each day her students meet online for 30 minutes, and participate in 3 hours of offline activities developed by Meredith and her colleagues. Here is an excerpt of our conversation:

Why do you think it is important to continue playful learning when schools are closed?

It's more important than ever. Students are most likely feeling stress. Many of my students have parents who work at the area hospitals, and cannot easily be at home with them. They might hear of grocery shortages, or be worried for a grandparent. We know this pandemic may cause stress, and we know that play can reduce stress and tension.

Our priorities have not changed, but shifted. We've always thought of the wellbeing of our students. What does that mean now? Making them feel safe and secure first, because they aren't going to be able to learn anything if they don't feel that way. It will take more to them to get there. Play can be that bridge.

How are you thinking about making learning playful?

Community and continuity.



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In the sense of community, our online sessions are opportunities to get to know each other in different ways. Today was my first online session with my home room. One student introduced his new puppy to our class, and another shared a LEGO city that he had spent days working on. Those things wouldn't have been as easy to share in person.

We're maintaining continuity by recreating similar experiences to what our students would expect in our classroom. Each day, we have a morning greeting. We've sent home these surprise envelopes labeled A,B,C, etc. Each morning, children go online to see which one they should open. The one labeled A has some pipe cleaners, and the prompt is: *What can you make with these? Post a photo of what you made.* It's a five minute exercise. I'm thinking of making glasses with mine. These are posted on a discussion page. The kids can see my postings. And they are encouraged to comment on each other's.



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Juliet's pipe cleaner flamingo (*photo courtesy of Juliet's family*)

Can you share some concrete strategies/activities?

As the reading teacher, when we're at school I let students choose where to read, to be more playful. I have kids reading with flashlights in the closet, and kids in the loft. Once, I had a student whose favorite place to read was the recycling bin. As long as they are reading, it's fine. So thinking of how they can do this at home, I had a challenge for them: build a cozy reading spot and take a photo of it to share.



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Riley's home-learning reading fort (*photo courtesy Riley's mom*)

In our virtual meetings we will be reading to each other round robin style. While we don't usually do this in class, some of my students need fluency practice, so I want to make sure they are reading out loud. Since some kids get nervous about reading out loud I'm putting a spin on it – I sent everyone home with mustaches, which they don't know about yet. That is also in a surprise envelope. Just to take the edge off it. Other props, like sunglasses, are also encouraged.

How are you talking to your ten-year-old students about the pandemic?

It's been easier than I expected it to be, which is a reflection of the work we've done as a school. Our culture is very



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cohesive. These kids are so good about listening to each other and not prejudging. Even so, they will come in asking questions. They're genuinely curious. I'll answer them when appropriate. If not appropriate, I'll let them talk about their feelings, asking them "How does it make you feel when you hear that? Are you concerned? About what?" When other students share similar thoughts and feelings I find it normalizes it. I can't say, "It will all be OK. Don't worry about it." I can say, "It's normal to feel this way. Many of us are having these feelings. That's all right. And we don't have to spend our whole day feeling this way. We can think about it, name it, and own it. And do things that take our minds off it."

In an online conversation this morning one student asked what we can do to help others. Someone suggested gardening because the food banks might be low when this is over, and it's still safe to plant crops (in North Carolina you can donate fresh produce to food pantries). Or with the help of parents, sending positive messages. Or just calling grandparents. They came up with a lot of ideas. They want to be contributors and help.

There is much to learn from teachers and their students who are bravely and playfully moving into this uncharted territory. We plan to continue to use the *popatplay* blog to share ideas as educators around the world adjust to supporting their learners during a time of school closures.



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March 24, 2020

Playful Home Learning Series: #2

Jodie Ricci, guest author

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, this is our second post in a series about playful teaching and learning during prolonged school closures. That we are talking about play and playfulness during this global crisis doesn't mean we don't take the situation seriously. We are deeply saddened by the ongoing loss of life and toll this outbreak will continue to take. Yet as educators who understand the value of learning through play, we feel a responsibility to help playful learning continue for the many children who will be learning at home.

**“An invitation to
online teaching:
play, collaboration,**



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and room for mistakes!"

by Jodie Ricci, guest author

Some inspiration...

According to acclaimed Chinese artist Xu Bing, the answer is all around us. "Our creations will always be a response to the new energy and questions or problems that occur from our social reality."



Xu Bing, The Phoenix,
<https://mymodernmet.com/xu-bing-phoenix/>

Some context...

For the past five semesters, I have had the opportunity to coach educators from around the world in the Project Zero online classroom. When I began my virtual online adventure, I never imagined that I would see or experience the depth of connections possible in this type of learning environment. The authentic relationships, genuine



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support, and joy that I've gained from my online interactions are an essential part of my identity as an educator. From meaningful learning, to agency and empowerment, to a world bursting with resources, online learning has allowed me to go deeper into my practice, explore the unknown, and peek into classrooms all around the globe. It has given me the space to formulate words, reflect on actions, and to revise my responses. It has strengthened my asynchronous and synchronous communications, improved my writing, and pushed my thinking. It has inspired me to try new things, given me more clarity, and reaffirmed my values. My hope is that this post will help you zoom out, consider the big picture, and turn your uncertainty into productive action.

Doing so will help you feel less alone as you move through fear and into the new creations of tomorrow.

Virtual online learning is indeed an adventure. Welcome to the playground...

Some Considerations...

1. Just start playing...



image from *Minecraft* game (Mojang 2009)



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"Virtual online learning reminds me of Minecraft... You start the game and you're met with the huge, immense, intimidating world. It's actually daunting at first because of the sheer quantity of possibilities. A lot of people have a hard time playing at first because they aren't sure what to build. I mean, what exactly do you build when you can make almost anything? And then you start building...And you sort of lose yourself in it." -Zack Kordeleski

There is an overwhelming swirl of information bursting through most computer screens right now. Lists of free online resources, project ideas, tutorials, curriculum, webinars, zoom calls, and "how to" guides are flooding through school in-boxes and social media posts. How can we make sense of this information at a time when the speed and pace of change is so fast? Like a young learner who runs as quickly as possible onto a playground, educators need to embrace a spirit of experimentation, adventure, and discovery. If you are afraid of climbing the monkey bars on the first day of school, start with the swings. If you want to jump right in and climb to the top of the playground, lead the way. You do not need to start your virtual online teaching experience with all of the answers. Educators - be kind to yourself, start with one new thing that resonates with you, and give yourself time and permission to **just start playing**.



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2. Find your cohort...



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my PZ Online cohort!

It always fascinates me how quickly young learners find each other on the playground. Even though children have different social needs, they eventually gravitate towards each other and find like-minded peers to share in their adventures. In an uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world, now is the time to find your cohort. Educators across the globe are in the midst of a fundamental change and we have an opportunity to become even more interdependent and connected. Consider calling a colleague and working together to address the challenges and puzzles that will inevitably come up as part of this new teaching experience. Ask your students “what are you curious about learning today?” Crowdsourc, co-inspire, and co-create with teachers from different schools and learning contexts. Propose share-outs, text your colleagues, pose a question to educators on social media, and build mechanisms and processes that will allow you to stay connected with others in our profession. When you have a good idea, leverage your own wisdom. When you hear a good idea,



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leverage the wisdom of others. The good news is that we are all in this together – so go out and **find your cohort**.

3. Get back up...



Falling down after a class chair design challenge!

The bumps and bruises that inevitably come with new playground adventures help children understand their own capacity and humanity. Children have to fall in order to learn how to get back up and so do we! We have an incredible opportunity to model our own learning, vulnerability, and mistakes as we transition to online learning. Most of our students are growing up in a digital online world, and now we get to be in that world with them. Messing up, laughing at our own challenges, and admitting that we do not have the answers are all gifts we can give to our students. If we want our students to develop habits that will help them navigate the ups and downs of life, we need to model our own commitment to learning, persistence, and getting back up. Ask yourself, “what do I want to



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cultivate at this time?” and then go out and model those things in your new virtual online classroom. It’s time to **get back up!**

An invitation...

As we enter into a new way of teaching and learning, and try to make sense of our current global context, I’d like to propose a toast to all of the educators out there trying to figure this thing out:

In uncertain and clarifying times, we have the chance to construct powerful new narratives. We can use this situation as an opportunity to connect, play, explore, and reinvent. We *can* create space for play, risk taking, fun, and co-creation.

So, here’s to board games, walking in the woods, kitchen concoctions, dress up, and playground adventures. Let’s do this thing!

Jodie Ricci is the PS-12 Performing Arts Chair at Hawken School in Cleveland, Ohio. For the past several years, she has collaborated with students, researchers, and educators to develop an actionable framework to support more distributed and participatory forms of creativity. She is a classroom practitioner of Agency by Design research and a coach in the Project Zero Thinking and Learning in the Maker-Centered Classroom online course. She recently published The SEED Framework for Cultivating Creativity in the Springer Encyclopedia of Educational



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*Innovation, a major reference work
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March 27, 2020

Playful Home Learning Series #3

This is the third in a series of posts about playful teaching and learning during a time of prolonged school closures. That we are talking about play and playfulness during this global crisis doesn't mean we don't take the situation seriously. We are deeply saddened by the ongoing loss of life and devastating toll this outbreak continues to take. Yet as educators who understand the importance of learning through play, we feel a responsibility to help playful learning continue for our children who are learning at home.

Traditional games and creative



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technologies to support learning at home

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Kgopotso Khumalo and Steph Nowack are PoP researchers from South Africa. They work at the NGO Care for Education and are coaches for the PoP online course *Let's Play*. Events in South Africa unfolded at a pace where many schools did not have time to create detailed learning plans. Below we share excerpts from a conversation with Steph and Kgopotso about the situation and ways to support playful learning in South Africa, though we think their ideas have relevance to other countries as well.

Playful learning is even more important in times of crisis

Our children are worried. Kgopotso was watching the news at home and her eight-year-old son said to her, "Please don't let them talk about corona, please don't let them talk about corona." Of course, the newscasters talked about the virus, and he cried out, "No!" It's a scary time for all of us.

Playful learning is especially important in times of crisis. Think about what children feel when they are learning through play: ownership, curiosity, and enjoyment along with safety and a sense of belonging. All positive emotions that can help them process the crisis and help children focus on learning.



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Children want to play. They also want to learn. Without schools' timetables and myriad rules, the paradoxes between play and learning environment diminish. We have the responsibility to continue children's academic learning and an opportunity to enhance their agency through playful experiences. Indeed, at this moment, we need them to take a greater role leading their own learning and what better way than through play - something they already want to do.

We need options for learners without high speed internet

While Google Classroom and Zoom are great tools, because the majority of South African families don't have access to high speed internet, we need other ways to engage children in learning. These options include:

Traditional games and activities

There are a variety of traditional games that foster learning. The South African game, Morabaraba, is a good example. A game for two players, the goal is to place three chips in a row and prevent your opponent from doing the same. There is a lot of strategy and mathematical thinking involved. And the chips can be anything: can lids, stones, bottle caps, etc.

Cooking is an activity that children can take part in and learn playfully. There is



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measurement and chemical transformations. And they and their caregivers can tinker with recipes, tastes, and smells.



Mother and son at play: Kgopotso and her son, Kgotso, in a game of Morabaraba

Technologies children have access to

While not having access to high speed internet, many South Africans can connect with social media including Facebook and Twitter. At the moment, WhatsApp is the go-to messaging system in the country. This platform is well positioned for educators to



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leverage in supporting playful learning (in other contexts there may be other platforms on which to rely).

We can imagine educators posting short (2 minute) videos or written invitations on WhatsApp that introduce a concept and end with an open-ended question or suggestion for a playful activity to explore the concept further.

Some of these invitations should be related to the curriculum. If the Grade 4 lesson is on the parts of plants, learners could be asked to collect a specimen and study it.

These invitations can help extend and bring to life lessons in the Department of Basic Education handbooks that children were sent home with. For example, in maths the workbooks have children writing out patterns. A video could invite learners to create patterns out of recycled or household materials.

Teachers could curate online galleries where learners post their ideas (e.g., a pattern they created or a drawing of the plant they collected). Learners could share comments and support each other's' learning in discussion forums.



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When accessible, invitations could connect learners to other online learning resources and opportunities.

Liam Nilsen from LEGO Foundation has created a StoryCity challenge where children can use natural or recycled materials and contribute ideas to a growing global community. And the Exploratorium is great source of playful learning opportunities.

During South Africa's 21 day lock down, Care for Education is posting one playful learning activity per day based on the Six Bricks program. Invitations could connect to these activities.

All of these invitations could be aimed at learners or their caregivers (providing guidance on how to help children playfully engage in learning activities).

These invitations can be created by an individual teacher for her class. Groups of educators could create resources for their school. And district and ministry officials can support the sharing and dissemination of particularly good resources.

In our ideal world, TV and radio would also be used to support playful learning. What if each morning children were given a challenge —to make something, write to someone, investigate part of their neighborhood, or solve a problem. Imagine children excitedly gathering



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around the radio at the start of the day to listen to the day's playful learning challenge.

Talking to children about the pandemic

In a real way, the current situation makes learning school subjects more relevant and meaningful: understanding the mathematical representations that explain how the virus might spread; understanding the biology of how the disease affects the body; knowing the chemistry of how to make hand sanitizer. For younger children, understanding the role healthcare professionals play in keeping people healthy. Along with being worried, children are interested and curious about all things related to the virus. Knowledge is power and can help children in managing their fears.

And like the scientists who are working tirelessly to understand and bring this outbreak under control, learning can be a great intellectual adventure that we can take part in together. We can't leave our children in the unknown. Rather, we need to inform and educate them as citizens of the world. Playful learning is a great tool towards this goal.



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April 1, 2020

Playful Home Learning Series: #4

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, this post is the fourth in a series about playful teaching and learning during prolonged school closures. That we are talking about play and playfulness during this global crisis doesn't mean we don't take the situation seriously. We are deeply saddened by the ongoing loss of life and toll this outbreak will continue to take. Yet as educators who understand the value of learning through play, we feel a responsibility to help playful learning continue for the many children who will be learning at home.

*Para leer esta publicación en español,
[visite el sitio web de aeioTU](#)*



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courageous response to COVID-19

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Maria Adelaida Lopez, Nehyi Quintero, and Laura Guzman are part of the leadership team of aeioTU, an organization based in Colombia that works with 26 centers throughout the country, providing comprehensive services to 20,000 young children and their families mainly in vulnerable communities. Since March 16th, childcare centers and schools in Colombia have been closed due to COVID-19. Implementing “aeioTU at Home with You,” the organization has worked tirelessly to support families’ mental and physical health and continue playful learning for children. We reached out to Maria, Nehyi, and Laura because of their insights into the unique challenges faced by early childhood educators working with low-income families. Our conversation left us impressed by how aeioTU continues to pay attention to families’ cultural contexts and strengths, thus empowering communities. We also learned how an organization that takes a playful approach to their own learning can quickly adapt to extremely challenging conditions. Here is an excerpt of our conversation:

As leaders of an organization, why is it important to continue playful learning when the centers are closed?



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Maria: This has been an opportunity to reinvent. We are learning every day. We've been taking all the necessary precautions and doing prudent planning for the whole team to be clear what our day by day and weekly objectives are. As leaders, we have to help the whole organization embrace this complex and uncertain situation. To rethink our ways to relate to each other. To relate to ourselves. To communicate. To stay connected. To be present. As leaders, it is most important to be present in the life of each of us. And to know that together we can do better. That together we are able to embrace the situation and help each other. To be positive. To take risks. And to be present in the lives of the educators and families, and of course, in the lives of the children.

Something I've learned working closely with the Reggio educators and community: keep our spirits alive and our playful dispositions. The playful dispositions help us to embrace the situation from a place of love, positivism, giving to others, and being proactive when we can. Not to panic. To make the best of the situation.



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**How are you thinking
about keeping learning**



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playful while children are at home?

Homes are unique contexts

Laura: We need teachers to recognize the contexts of the homes. To know the materials that are in the home. And recognize that home is not school. We need to respect the times of the families and the different moments of parents and children, in the relationships and ways of playing. What are the families' daily routines and what do they have to do? And helping parents realize how kids can be part of these in playful and learning ways.





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painting with food (photo courtesy aeioTU)

Two-way communications between families and educators

Nehyi: Our central message to families is that we can spend this time in a calm, pleasant way. We just have to adapt. It's important to help families not feel isolated; that we are with them. We are present.

Maria: It is important to understand the cultural aspects of the families. To be very respectful of family context. So we need to listen and learn from them.

Nehyi: It isn't the same for everyone. If teachers are in constant conversations with the families we can understand their situations and we can help them understand what play means and entails. So we



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are giving tips and ideas and we are also asking: What kind of stories has she (your child) liked the most? What materials is she interested in? What isn't she playing with? So we can give new ideas to parents and help all of us be focused on the child and the child's interests. This makes activities meaningful to the child and so then the child will be learning.

Laura: We need to help families understand the power of learning through play. Parents are worried about staying with children for the whole time and some think they have to rely just on videos or TV to occupy them. We (parents and educators) need to believe in the ability of children to learn individually and collectively. Therefore, it's valid to provide scenarios where children explore, create, imagine, investigate, question and even get bored. This opens up new ideas, possibilities and scenarios of play provided at home. We need to figure out what kinds of play can be developed in these new contexts—what types of play can be developed in each place at home and every moment of the day. There must be a balance between the times and roles of those who are part of home, seeking a harmonious wellness among those who are part of it. Quality, significant



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scenarios can strengthen the emotional ties and the discovery of the creative capacities of both children and adults.

Nehyi: We have a book we created 4 years ago with 1000 small tips for families to accompany children's development from home. We are using these tips and sharing with families via phone calls and social networks. [You can see their ideas on [instagram](#) and [facebook](#).]



painting with water (photo courtesy aeioTU)



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Collaboration inside and outside of our organization

Maria: For children to have opportunities for playful learning, we also need to listen to their families' needs. We



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need to be aware of health and safety situations. As an organization we are mobilizing the social aspects, working with other stakeholders like the psychologists and social workers in all our communities, so we can provide coaching and services to the families. And we need to be aware that most are not able to work and so there is hunger. No one can go out and make a living. So there is a commitment to provide food resources for the families.

Nehyi: Our teachers and psychologists and social workers are working together to develop supports for families, some which teachers can share directly. And teachers can identify which families need additional support.

What are some of the concrete strategies/activities you are deploying?

Phone calls

Nehyi: Since many families don't have access to the internet, teachers are making phone calls to families twice a week and sometimes more. They talk to children and their families. We talk to the families and learn about their



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situations and provide them ideas about what experiences they could be providing to the children. How to use recycled materials for children to play. Also understanding the importance of everyday moments and how play can be present in daily routines. For example, children could be playing by creating stories as they fold the laundry or they could play while washing their hands and seeing different shades of soap bubbles. Teachers are helping parents see that play is just a funnier way for children to do things.

Routines and rules are important to children and parents. Routines give stability. So we are giving advice on how families can make routines together in a fun way. We are advising parents to create a schedule with the children and make collective agreements about the space they are all sharing. Everyone is sharing their home for a long period of time. Rules help everyone understand how to manage this different situation. Families can make these rules and routines in playful ways: using puppets, drawing. You can have different strategies based on what each family likes to do. Of course, for young children this promotes self-regulation.



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We also provide health and nutrition advice and guidance on how to cope with being in the house all the time. And if they are having a hard time, families will receive more than two calls a week, from the psychologists and nutritionists as well.

And more!

Nehyi: We use virtual tools for families that have access. For families without access we use Voice Notes where teachers read books and share ideas for activities that they send through social media. For example, provocations of how to explore light and shadow. In some cities we have delivered materials -- printed materials and kits with wood and cloth and seeds for children to explore.

Maria: We learned that for some families radio is the best way to share information.

Laura: Yes, so we are reaching out to radio stations to share tips and knowledge. We are creating new ways to stay close to the families.



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How are you helping families talk to their

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children about the pandemic?

Laura: We are using the *languages of the arts*. It's important to recognize the languages of art because they are very important to play. For example, stories and storytelling and puppets to share with children in a close and empathetic way. And to help us understand what children are thinking and to know their feelings. And thus provide tools that support their emotions.

It is important is to have a *dialogue with children* about the situation that recognizes their feelings. Being very truthful about the situation. Respectful but truthful; not hiding things that are going on. You don't have to explain everything, but share in a manner they can understand.

Maria: And to understand that *children need touch*. They need to kiss you. They need to hug you. Children need that physical presence. We need to embrace this need with love. So not just saying, "I can't kiss you now" but finding other languages for kissing and hugging. Using puppets and other tools to send kisses. Using expressions and silent languages to help children feel



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they have been kissed and hugged. A reinventing of ways of being with each other. The situation is showing us different ways of communicating with each other.

Nejhi: We need to help parents understand that *children are resilient and they build this resilience from seeing examples*. You can explain to children that we need to be at home to take care of each other and to help our community. Without panicking. That by following medical advice the home is a safe environment. This is what the children are going to remember: that we can manage hard situations and we can support each other. **We can manage crisis and manage it with love and peace in our hearts and being hopeful.**

We encourage you to read more about [aeioTU](#) and the wonderful work that they do. And here's another [helpful resource](#) for early childhood educators looking to support children and families during this time of learning at home.



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April 6, 2020

Playful Home Learning Series: #5

Sidsel N. Overgaard

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, this post is the fifth in a series about playful teaching and learning during prolonged school closures. That we are talking about play and playfulness during this global crisis doesn't mean we don't take the situation seriously. We are deeply saddened by the ongoing loss of life and toll this outbreak will continue to take. Yet as educators who understand the value of learning through play, we feel a responsibility to help playful learning continue for the many children who will be learning at home.

Playful home learning: the parent perspective



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by Sidsel N. Overgaard

“It's a weird, unexpected situation that is helping us knowing our child much better.”

In the Playful Home Learning series we've heard from several teachers offering encouragement and ideas for engaging students from afar at this strange moment in time. But what about the adults on the other end of the line? Parent collaboration is a critical element of education at any time, but now as parents work, play and head to the cafeteria alongside their children, the opportunity to engage them in the playful learning process has never been greater...or more complicated.

In an effort to test the temperature of the water “out there” after our first week of distance learning, ISB's leadership team sent a survey to parents (as well as Middle School students). The survey was designed to be quick, and most people completed it in under two minutes. At the same time, the invitation for feedback launched a small flood of emails to our head of school's inbox: missives from parents with more to say, more thanks to give, more suggestions to offer.

Based on the results of that survey and the content of those emails, two themes have emerged in our attempt to gauge the incredibly diverse and therefore somewhat elusive “parent perspective” on distance learning at ISB: **appreciation** and **balance**.

“In general, how are you feeling about our distance learning



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programme?”

This was the first question on our survey, and most parents set the slider somewhere between 7 and 8 on a scale of 10—a remarkably positive response given the rapid pace of implementation and some inevitable first-week kinks.

I think few would disagree that ISB has certain advantages when it comes to distance learning. One of those is resources: most ISB families are well-equipped with the tools for online education and we feel extremely fortunate for that privilege.

But the level of parent satisfaction isn't just about resources. Parents have been expressing appreciation not just about the fact that their children *are* occupied, but about the *way* they are occupied. I feel it too. For two weeks, I have sat across the table from my 11 year old as she has managed full days of school with (mostly) quiet confidence—meeting online with her teachers and classmates, mastering new concepts in geometry, analyzing the works of Beatrix Potter. My 9 year old has experienced a steeper learning curve with some good days and some bad days. But as the weeks have passed I have also watched as trust in her own abilities has grown and her reflexive requests for help have quieted.



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Sidsel's kids, Else and Mette, in their home learning environment

When we get positive feedback from parents, and comments that speak to the engagement of teachers, the independence of students, and the quality of the work, I can't help but think that this is—at least in part—the result of being a school committed to learning through play.

“Both of our kids participate naturally in the distance learning programme and we are very thankful...that our children have been prepared from their previous school years to actually handle a situation like this.”

As this quote from one parent implies, ISB students and teachers have been unintentionally preparing for this moment for years. Take, for example, Student Composed Schedule weeks, an idea sparked by one of our Pedagogy of Play teacher-researchers, which have been held in the ISB Middle School since 2018. During these semiannual two-week stretches, the regular schedule gets kicked to the curb, and students



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are responsible for designing their own school day: managing their time and assignments and finding peers and teachers to ask for help when necessary. There is no question that this experiment in independent learning has made the current situation feel less foreign to students (and teachers!) than it might otherwise have felt.

There are also advantages at the Kindergarten and Primary level. As a school where inquiry-driven learning is the aim, and where tests are all but non-existent for those younger than 12, we are constantly experimenting with different ways of making student learning visible to parents. Not long ago this led us to a digital portfolio platform called Seesaw. Since the start of this year, our PYP Coordinator has been working hard to ensure consistent, student-driven use of the program across grade levels. Now that Seesaw is familiar to both students and parents, it has proven an indispensable tool for communication and feedback on open-ended, playful assignments during these weeks of distance learning.



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Staying connected via online platforms

“I can tell that my children are exhausted in a different way than they are when a normal school day is over.”

For all these reasons, ISB has been able to provide a fairly high degree of normalcy for students—especially older students—during these last few weeks.

For parents who are attempting a full workload from home, seeing their children work through a school day with confident independence can feel like a godsend: “You’re a lifesaver!” they say.

But...

As the parent quote above reminds us, the fact is that these are *not* normal times. To pretend otherwise not only adds to the exhaustion and pressure



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some families are feeling—it is potentially a missed opportunity.

Every family situation is unique. Working parents with older children may appreciate the “normalcy” ISB provides, but parents with younger children who—no matter how independent—require a higher degree of support, may be finding themselves overwhelmed. These are likely some of the families that have requested, “a little more flexibility in the assignments children receive.”

Kindergarten parents, especially, are in a tight spot. There is only so much self-guided schoolwork very young children can manage. Physical proximity—one of the main casualties of this pandemic—is critical.

And then there are the families where perhaps one or both parents are not working at the moment, and for whom this strange moment presents a rare opportunity for something *completely* different: time to be together as a family, to teach the kids how to cook or change a tire, to learn through play *outside* the school context. For these families, suggestions might be more appropriate than assignments.

“Your teachers are demonstrating huge engagement and so much preparation for every class. Huge kudos to your staff for all their hard work!!”

With all these diverse wants and needs, there will never be a single answer to the question of how to do distance learning “right” from a parent perspective. But just as our teachers are always thinking about how to make



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school a place of choice, wonder and delight for a diversity of student learners, they are now trying to do the same with parents in mind. Everyday they tweak the balance—trying out new types of assignments (required, optional, online, offline, with parent help, without parent help) and finding new ways to support with humor, feedback and moments of social engagement.

At this moment in time, I think it's important to remember that some of the most crucial indicators of playful learning relate to how we recognize and use moments of serendipity: being spontaneous, taking risks, improvising, exploring, working through a challenge.

As challenging as the current reality is, it is also an opportunity to explore *this* side of learning through play, and parents are helping to push us in that direction: to reflect, to iterate, to adjust.

All very familiar concepts to any playful teacher.

Head of School Camilla Uhre Fog perhaps said it best last Friday, when she sent a note of encouragement to ISB staff—many of whom are also parents juggling children while working from home: “While we keep repeating *“quality over quantity”* and *“let’s keep it simple,”* I know—and am grateful—that we all stay true to who we are: a community of ambitious playful learners.”

In whatever form that takes.

Sidsel is the Senior Communications Manager at the International School of Billund, and is currently facilitating home learning with her daughters Else, age 11,



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*and Mette, age 9, both students at ISB.
Sidsel has been with PoP since we
began in 2015.*

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April 15, 2020

Playful Home Learning Series: #6

Megina Baker, guest author

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, this is the sixth post in a series about playful teaching and learning during prolonged school closures. That we are talking about play and playfulness during this global crisis doesn't mean we don't take the situation seriously. We are deeply saddened by the ongoing loss of life and toll this outbreak will continue to take. Yet as educators who understand the value of learning through play, we feel a responsibility to help playful learning continue for the many children who will be learning at home.

Maintaining a Playful Mindset:



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Teacher Education during COVID-19

by Megina Baker

As a teacher educator in the Early Childhood Education program at Boston University's Wheelock College of Education and Human Development, I don't teach any online courses. About half my workweek is typically spent in local public school kindergarten classrooms, where I mentor student teachers during fieldwork experiences. This fieldwork is paired with a weekly student teaching seminar, which has a focus on teaching science to young children and is deeply informed by the Pedagogy of Play emerging framework.



*Megina's teaching seminar (pre-COVID):
Citizen Science at the Charles River*

So when the news came that Boston University would be shifting to virtual learning effective immediately, my first concern was for a couple of students who would need access to reliable internet and laptops at home. How would they stay connected? How could



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we help? Fortunately, university and community resources were able to get that essential structure in place. Then new questions rushed in. **How can I keep making this college course an experience of playful learning for my students? Is playful even what we need right now?**

Several weeks in to this new way of teaching, here's what I'm learning:

Students want and need to talk about COVID-19 and how it is impacting their lives and the lives of the children in their fieldwork placements. I make sure to make some space for this in every session.

Before COVID-19, we used to sit together on the floor each week, in a circle, and play a card game I invented called "Connection, Question, Success".

In this game, students use cards to discuss and connect to each other's classroom experiences and course readings. We can't sit in a circle now, so we open our sessions by playing virtual "tag" instead – each person tagging the next as we take turns sharing experiences. Or we play "Rose, Thorn, and Bud" to share about something positive about in the past week (rose), something that was challenging (thorn), and something we look forward to (bud). My goal is to *welcome the range of emotions* that are coming up at this time, while *maintaining a playful mindset* that can help us all stay connected with each other in the virtual space. Having a playful mindset helps us imagine possibilities rather than limits, stay



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Learning through play is still possible in the virtual environment - it's just different.

During the Friday science seminars, my class often takes trips to places like the Arnold Arboretum to uncover invertebrates in the soil, or the Boston Museum of Science to learn about informal scientific learning for young children. All of this makes for a pretty playful teaching and learning experience. We're staying home now, but thanks to some creative collaboration with the educators at these wonderful local institutions, we've brought those sessions to Zoom instead. One week, we all did an experiment in our kitchens, examining properties of materials -- frying eggs, melting butter, and observing what happens to a rock when we put it in boiling water (not much -- other than getting very hot!).



a Zoom-based playful exploration of materials

The next week, during a virtual session with Meredith Mahoney, a museum



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educator from the Educator Resource Center at the Boston Museum of Science, we tried a Barrier Activity in which we each tried to describe household items so a partner could guess which material we were talking about. “What does it feel like” “What does it sound like when you drop it?” and “How does it smell?” “Like... cookies?!” Turns out this produced a lot of oral language and a lot of laughter, while engaging in learning through play with a purpose as we considered young children as sensory-minded learners.

Get lots of feedback from students, and reinvent or stop doing things that don’t work.

In our first virtual class, our usually talkative and engaged group of students were reticent. Conversation slowed down and when I asked for a “fist to five” assessment of how the session had gone at the end (hold up 0 to 5 fingers – 5 for an excellent experience, 0 for a terrible one) most students held up 3, 4 fingers. Not bad, but not great.

What needed to change? More time in breakout rooms, they suggested.

Shorten the class session and take a longer break in the middle, to mitigate Zoom fatigue. Figure out a system for calling on folks to get rid of that unproductive and uncomfortable virtual silence. This feedback in hand, I’ve reshaped our subsequent sessions to be shorter and differently structured. I keep asking for feedback. I imagine we will keep adapting and changing the rules as we gain experience in this virtual learning space.



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This week, my students are preparing for a virtual session with Ana Maria Caballero, a nature educator from the Arboretum. Before the session, we will try some Everyday Nature Tasks the Arboretum has published online, like spending a few minutes listening for birdsong, or taking close-up photographs of items in nature. We will each do this offline, at a safe social distance, in our backyards, from our balconies, or on neighborhood walks. When we get together on Friday, we'll share our experiences through video, audio recordings, and photographs (image below). I'm looking forward to more playful learning with and from each other as we discuss designing nature-based learning experiences for young children. **Yes, teacher education looks different right now, but playful learning doesn't have to end.** And the longer this situation goes on, the more convinced I feel that any moments my students and I can spend together sharing a playful mindset will do all of us a little good.

Megina's Documentation Task: Nature Fools Day

April 1, in the woods nearby
Looking closely at patterns, forms, and shapes in the forest



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Megina is a Lecturer in Early Childhood Education at Boston University's Wheelock College of Education and Human Development. Before joining the

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BU faculty, she was a PoP researcher from 2015-2018 and continues to collaborate with the project as a PoP Fellow.

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April 17, 2020

A playful diversion (especially for Harry Potter fans)

Ben Mardell

A Harry Potter themed blog post in the midst of a global pandemic? While we wish we had a magic wand that could banish COVID-19, this post is offered as a respite from the real world, especially for those of you who are Potter fans and playful learning geeks (we suspect there may be significant overlap here). As Albus Dumbledore, the head master of J.K. Rowling's magical school Hogwarts, noted about the Weasley twins' shenanigans, during dark times comic relief is something to be treasured.

Pedagogy of Play: The Contribution from the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was founded over a thousand years ago to provide a high standard of magical education for the youth of the British Isles (see [Hogwarts: A History](#)). While not all instruction at the school can be called magical (or even good) there are lessons to be gleaned from the school about a pedagogy of play. In this post we look at what can be learned from Hogwarts concerning three central questions:





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Why is playful learning in school important?

What does playful learning in school look and feel like?

How can educators promote cultures of playful learning?

Why is playful learning in school important?

The experiences of Hogwarts students make clear the importance of the skills and dispositions that playful learning promotes. For example, in their first year at the school, Harry Potter, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger must make their way past a giant, three headed dog, open a magically locked door, cross a life sized chess board with dangerously enchanted pieces, and figure out which potion to take in order to pass through fire—all in service of thwarting an evil wizard. Risk-taking, problem solving, and critical thinking were essential for Harry, Ron and Hermione to solve these complex problems.

What does playful learning in school look at feel like?

In order to promote playful learning, educators need a clear understanding of what the phenomenon looks and feels like. In groundbreaking playful work at the Aarhus University, researcher Savhannah Schulz takes on this important question in relation to Hogwarts, focusing on the playful pedagogy of specific teachers. Summarizing her findings she writes:



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Grubbly-Plank seems to be particularly strong on following students' **wonder** and **delight**. Lupin has his strengths in **empowerment, engagement** and **working through a challenge**. Hagrid is strong on **curiosity** and especially **risk-taking**, but perhaps is not able to transfer his own delight to his students. Dumbledore values individual **curiosity, imagination, ownership** and in some forms also **risk-taking**. In Fantastic Beasts, he also seems to aid students in reflecting on what they have learned. Mad-Eye (ignoring for a moment that he is really Barty Crouch Jr.) takes students seriously as agents of their own learning and **empowers** them in some ways (Schulz, 2020).

A conceptual problem here, which Schulz acknowledges, is that while play is universal (everyone plays including wizards and witches), play is also culturally specific. In the absence of Indicators of Playful Learning for Hogwarts, she relies on indicators developed at the International School of Billund (ISB). While ISB has wonderful teachers, none (as far as we know) is a witch or wizard. Developing culturally specific indicators for the magical world is an area where further research is required.

How can educators promote cultures of playful learning?



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Promoting cultures of playful learning in school involves educators navigating the paradoxes between play and school. For example, teachers need to support student agency and at the same time help them meet adult learning goals. Research at Hogwarts on a magical instrument called the pensieve provides an important tool to support teachers in this effort.

The pensieve is a stone bowl that is used to review memories. Hogwarts' head master Albus Dumbledore explains the pensieve:

I sometimes find, and I am sure you know the feeling, that I simply have too many thoughts and memories crammed into my mind...One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one's mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at one's leisure. It becomes easier to spot patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form.

We imagine educators know exactly what Dumbledore describes. There are so many interactions and conversations that happen in a typical school day that, even though teachers probably see only 10% of them, at the end of the day, it's hard to remember what they have heard and observed.

For those in the non-magical world, the tool of pedagogical documentation can serve as a substitute for the pensieve. Documentation, which involves gathering artifacts of student learning



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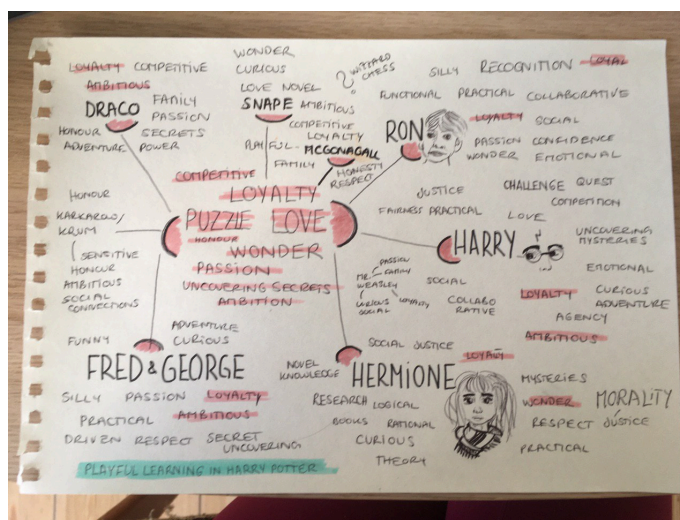
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including video, photographs, observational notes and student work, can allow educators to revisit moments of learning in order to deepen future learning.

If you have gotten to the end of this post I imagine you really are a Harry Potter fan and a playful learning geek. So a challenge: what would the indicators of playful learning involve for Hogwarts? There is a lot of data to draw on -- seven books worth (well, six as Harry, Ron and Hermione don't return to classes in the final book). Have fun creating your own indicators. If you're game, share your research by tagging [#popHogwartsIndicators](#)



In her research, Savhannah has tried to identify what playful learning looks and feels like in the magical world of Hogwarts.

And back to the real world. I want to end this post by applauding the playful learning that is taking place in laboratories around the globe, as scientists explore, experiment, imagine, and create, in order to make the magic



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wands needed to bring the pandemic to an end.



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April 24, 2020

Engaging Families in a Culture of Playful Learning in Schools: A Theory of Change

Catalina Rey Guerra and S. Lynneth Solis

Today's post is co-authored by Catalina Rey-Guerra, a doctoral student at Boston College, and Lynneth Solis (from the PoP team). Catalina's research focuses on the reciprocal interactions between children and their families, teachers, and learning environments, while searching for protective and promotive factors of early development.

Last May, we wrote a blog post about engaging [families as allies](#) in cultivating cultures of playful learning in schools. For the last few months, we have been exploring these ideas further to articulate a conceptual model to help guide efforts to engage families in playful learning. Although most of the thinking on this topic occurred for us long before the COVID-19 crisis, our



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current reality underscores that home-school partnerships are paramount for creating meaningful and seamless learning experiences for students. Today, as so many children are learning at home, we acknowledge, more than ever, the importance of families engaging in and promoting learning through play at home while being supported by schools and teachers. Here we discuss how schools can begin to articulate their efforts to engage families. Although some of this may not be easily implemented at this time, we believe that planning for family engagement proactively can help schools face the daily as well as unexpected challenges of creating and maintaining cultures of playful learning.

The process of engaging families in learning through play is neither an evident nor generic one. Family engagement varies across cultures and contexts and involves several efforts and actions in a variety of settings including, homes, schools, and other community spaces. Thus, successful family engagement in playful learning can occur along a continuum of exchanges where educators and families, together, examine beliefs about playful learning, recognize positive efforts taking place at home and at school, communicate openly about plans and expectations, and engage in co-constructing activities that foster playful learning.

To push our thinking about how to practically capture both, the specificities of school contexts as well as the commonalities in the process of



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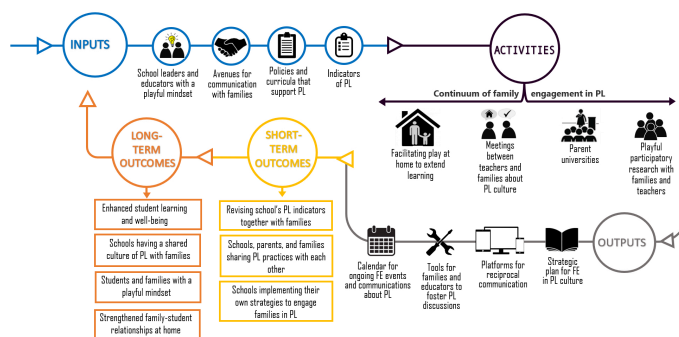
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engaging families, we propose a theory of change based on academic literature and our experiences in schools. Theories of change (TOC) are useful tools that help us link the efforts and activities being made in a program, intervention, or curriculum to the intended outputs and outcomes. Having a broader picture of why and for whom schools are trying to engage families in the culture of playful learning, ultimately helps all stakeholders involved to improve their understanding of the program or intervention and, thus, make more effective decisions. This TOC is a hypothesized model that can be used by educators and researchers to ideate, examine, and reimagine efforts to engage families in building a culture of playful learning both inside and outside of schools.



Inputs:

We suggest a number of inputs as the basic resources that schools need in order to start the process of engaging families in a culture of playful learning. To begin, a **playful mindset** on the part of educators and school leadership is paramount. If families are to be engaged in the process of creating a culture of playful learning in schools, this playfulness needs to be modeled by



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educators who share ideas and support families in extending the playfulness to the home. This is further supported by having **avenues for communication with families**--whether it's through online platforms or face-to-face meetings--that allow for the exchange of ideas and open discussions that go both ways. A school also needs to have **policies and curricular guidelines that support playful learning** and make it integral to what is communicated with families about the educational process in the school. Finally, this can all be guided by engaging as a school community in discussing and generating a set of **indicators of playful learning** that help the school community plan for, identify, and reflect on playful learning experiences (for examples of indicators, see ones that emerged in [three schools in South Africa](#) and at the [International School of Billund](#)). Of course, there are other inputs that schools may employ in this process; the important thing is to identify what these resources are so that they can be leveraged in engaging families in playful learning.

Activities:

There are many ways in which schools can engage families in playful learning. The continuum of activities presented in our TOC (and further elaborated in our earlier post) serves the purpose of portraying the wide range of possibilities of how families can engage in a culture of playful learning. On one side, family engagement involves **facilitating play at home to extend the learning**. On the other side, engagement in playful learning at the school can result from families engaging in [playful](#)





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participatory research with educators to design curricula and playful learning experiences together.

In between, the two sides of the continuum are constantly interacting to shape and support learning through play. Teachers can send home playful activities for the families to engage in with their children or they can ask families to share playful activities they do at home. Some spaces such as **meetings between teachers and families** and **parent universities** are activities that bridge the two environments and create opportunities for families and educators to share their ideas about playful learning and generate best practices together.

Outputs:

Activities that are written into and planned for in a school's **strategic plans** receive attention and resources. As a result of work with families, it is essential to identify the activities and practices that are successful in fostering a culture of playful learning and articulate how they will be carried out strategically. These plans can be revisited on a yearly or quarterly basis to adjust as goals or priorities shift for the school community.

To formalize exchanges between schools and families, it is helpful to continue to leverage **platforms that allow for reciprocal communication**. Whether it's an online sharing platform or scheduled calls home, planning for formal spaces where educators and families can post ideas, provide feedback, or pose questions about



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playful learning can help the flow of communication.

Having shared language and values is important in creating cultures of playful learning. As a result of activities with families, schools can generate **tools and protocols to support discussions** about the beliefs and expectations about playful learning. This can take the shape of value-sort activities, discussion starters, and play observation protocols to use at home and at school.

An ongoing **calendar of playful learning events and activities** that brings families and educators together in person or remotely can be very effective in generating the time and space for ongoing conversations around the challenges and opportunities of playful learning at home and at school.

Short-term outcomes:

In the short term, the work with families and development of outputs to help guide family engagement in a culture of playful learning can lead to **revisiting and revising indicators of playful learning** with families to reflect the common language that has emerged. The activities and outputs may also lead to more open and consistent communication between **schools and families, sharing playful learning practices with each other**. The hope is that over time, schools are more **strategic in the efforts they employ to engage families in playful learning**.

Long-term outcomes:



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Ultimately, efforts to engage families can result in **schools having a shared culture of playful learning with families**, where all stakeholders are committed to the maintenance of playful learning experiences at home and at school. In bridging the school and home environment, **students and families may also demonstrate a playful mindset**. In addition, families and students may have **strengthened relationships at home** and students will experience **enhanced learning and well-being** as a result of concerted efforts by schools and families.

Importantly, the processes represented in this TOC are cyclical in that there are feedback loops that feed into each other. Each year or at the end of each term, inputs can be revisited based on outputs, short-term, and long-term outcomes, and activities can be updated and redesigned based on what schools and families have learned from the engagement with each other.

The approaches illustrated in this TOC seem more relevant now than ever, given the current situation in which families and schools are trying to build strong partnerships to face the challenge of facilitating learning at home and provide children with meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences. In the current COVID-19 situation, and any other situations we may face in the future, having a network of support and shared understandings where families and educators are working collaboratively to create a culture of playful learning, could be key to successfully coping and adjusting to challenging times.



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May 1, 2020

Playful Home Learning Series: #7

Jason Blair, guest author

We return this week to our home learning series, examining what playful teaching and learning look like during a time of prolonged school closures. That we are talking about play and playfulness during this global crisis doesn't mean we don't take the situation seriously. We are deeply saddened by the ongoing loss of life and continued toll this outbreak will take. Yet as educators who understand the value of learning through play, we feel a responsibility to help playful learning continue for the many children who are at home.

Keeping the playful spirit of the art studio alive



PROJECT ZERO

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by Jason Blair



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When students are in the art studio, creative ideas collide into each other through playful exploration and experimentation. As a facilitator, I know that playful learning is a way to frame risk-taking and help develop student's comfort with ambiguity. In the art studio, the act of playing with ideas, concepts and questions helps develop a brave space for learning and growing.

So now that schools are closed for the foreseeable future, how do I facilitate these experiences remotely? How can educators use this moment as an opportunity to rethink our educational practice?

Each week, as part of their remote art experience, I post a new creativity challenge for our elementary students.

The purpose of these challenges is for students to not only exercise their creative muscles, but also to engage in a playful way with their entire family.

The best antidote for stress, anxiety, and isolation is to connect with others through playful experiences that spark wonder, joy, and laughter.



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These challenges invite the whole family to be active participants in the learning experience.

When designing online playful experiences, 5 key principles became evident to me:

- 1. Design opportunities for students to play with content through experimentation and discovery.**
- 2. Design opportunities that are student-centered and allow for infinite exploration.**
- 3. Design opportunities for playful collaboration.**
- 4. Design opportunities for artifact creation and celebration.**
- 5. Design opportunities that take advantage of no schedules or bells**



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These 5 principles have helped me to create a series of creativity challenges to provide for my students and their families during these unprecedented and uncertain times. Here are a few examples of what I've tried:

The Focus Challenge

Now that you are at home for your learning, you will have lots of distractions around you. How will you stay focused on what you need to do while there is craziness going on around you? *What if...* you created a short video showing yourself concentrating and staying focused, while the world around you is a bit chaotic and crazy.



One student's Focus Challenge Flipgrid video.

Teachers can create a Flipgrid page for students to upload their videos so the whole class can see and comment, or they can just email you directly as well.



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The Happy Space Challenge



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This challenge is to design a happy space for someone in your home. We all need a space where we can go to find happiness, peace and quiet. One of the best ways to take your mind off of the things we are missing is to design and create for someone else. Thinking of others at times like this can help brighten the days of those around us, and it also feels good to give to others when we are feeling so alone. Take time to interview someone in your home to gather some inspiration, then create their happy space.



A still from a student's Flipgrid video shows a Happy Space he designed for his grandma. Later in the video, he shows his grandma using the space.

Iron Artist Challenge

Gather some simple materials you can create with, like cardboard, junk mail, old fabric scraps, craft sticks, etc. Place them in a basket and put a cover over the basket. Then, find a partner in the house to challenge. Each person



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reaches into the basket to pull out a material. You can select a total of three materials.

Once each person has selected three materials, then the challenge is to make something out of them. If you want to adapt the challenge, you could also place a basket with noun, verb, adjective and try to create something that connects to the selected words, only using the materials you have selected.

Dinner Challenge

Before dinner, give each person a napkin. Tell them they need to create something to wear, using only napkins and tape.

Once everyone is done, you can have a dinner fashion show, to show off the napkin haute couture.

Hidden Emotion Art Gallery

We have all experienced a great deal of emotions these last few weeks. Feelings of sadness, confusion, anxiety, joy, hopefulness, hopelessness (and many others) have consumed us throughout the days and weeks since transitioning to online learning. Sometimes we hide our emotions on the inside and don't talk about them to others. Create a Hidden Emotion Art



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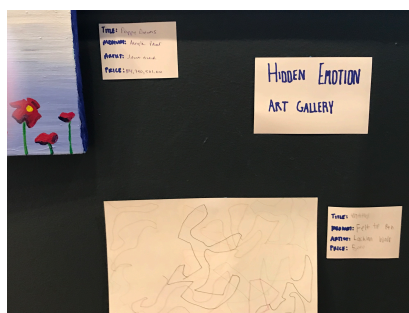
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Gallery dedicated to making these hidden emotions visible.

This challenge uses the art making process to help start a conversation about how families are feeling right now during these challenging times.



One of the benefits of a remote learning experience is that we no longer need to confine learning into compartmentalized blocks of time. We do not have to stop at the sound of a bell. We are free from the constraints of a typical school day, so this can also be an opportunity for transformation.

How might you design for playful learning experiences, while also growing your students' creative capacities?

Jason Blair teaches art to elementary students in grades 1 through 5 at Eli Pinney Elementary School in Dublin, Ohio (USA). If you are interested in seeing PDFs of these activities or would like to see other videos and challenges not included here, he invites you to email him.



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May 8, 2020

Finding Playfulness Amid Campus Closure

Gina Maurer and Siyuan Fan

This post is written by Gina Maurer and Siyuan Fan, two PoP research assistants who are master's students at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. On March 10 Gina and Siyuan learned that all Harvard classes would transition to virtual instruction, and that students would be asked to leave campus in the proceeding days. As members of the PoP USA team, Gina and Siyuan have been collecting and analyzing data about what playful learning looks and feels like in Boston-area schools. They now offer personal reflections about the role of playfulness in their own lives during COVID-19.



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The Potential for Distancing to Cultivate Connection

Gina Maurer

Abrupt goodbyes, rushed library book returns, frantic packing – I left my apartment within days of President Bacow’s announcement of Harvard’s closure, watching the desolate campus grow smaller in my rearview mirror as I drove home. There are many ways that I had imagined my time as a Harvard student would end, but this was most certainly not one of them.

How would we continue our master’s program in the wake of a pandemic, with students now spread out across the world? And what about our learning community? Since day one of orientation, Dean Long, the dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE), has emphasized that learning from our peers is an even more valuable and essential component of our educational experience than the content we learn from professors.

How would we keep the HGSE learning community together during a time when we needed each other more than ever? There were more questions than answers.



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Gina takes a last photo of Harvard Yard before she leaves campus to head home

But, at our graduate school, there was also more optimism than negativity, more calmness than fear, and a zealous commitment to maintaining and strengthening our sense of community.

I was apprehensive about the transition to virtual courses, and the first week of online learning was not without challenges. But, learning aside (can I say that as an education graduate student?), the transition to virtual learning has had a surprising effect – it's made me feel closer with my peers and professors, even though we are all physically farther apart.

Yes, I've learned the course content, but I've also learned a great deal about my



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peers' coffee mug selection, wall art decisions, and refrigerator magnet choices. I've met parents, spouses, children, and pets (so many cats – who knew the Harvard community was so full of cats?).

Suddenly and unintentionally, our learning community's connection became deeper in a more nuanced way. The unprecedented circumstances we are all grappling with has given us the opportunity to learn about each other to a greater extent and connect more profoundly.

Transitioning to online learning has allowed us to know professors and other students not only as mentors and peers, but as people – with families and music tastes and whistling tea kettles. All of a sudden, we have a glimpse into each other's lives that was not able to be seen on the grounds of campus. Recipes are now being exchanged in the same breath as an academic paper discussion.

Knowing one another on a more personal level has added a level of playfulness to every virtual class session I'm a part of. This playfulness stems from deeper personal connections among learners, and is apparent through meaningful discussions, laughter, and importantly, a shared feeling of connectedness with each other and our community.

While I miss walking the pathways in Harvard Yard, running into friends at the library, and physically being present on campus, I do not miss the feeling of



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being a member of a learning community.

Because I'm not just a part of a learning community anymore. I'm simply a part of a community. And that is so much more meaningful.

Playfulness under Unplayful Circumstances

Siyuan Fan

It was 9 am on the first day of my quarantine spring break. All I saw on my phone was the rapidly increasing number of people infected with COVID-19, my email inbox exploding with messages about moving courses online, and worries and warnings from my parents across the Pacific Ocean. Sitting at the table with breakfast in front of me, I felt so panicked and anxious that the delicious food seemed unappetizing.

I've always liked to plan ahead, and this was definitely not in my plan. I had imagined all kinds of uncertainties that could have happened in my work and study life as an international student coming to Boston for the first time, but COVID-19 was certainly not what I had envisioned for my spring break and studies.

I reflected on the classes I observed in Boston-area schools pre-COVID-19 during our PoP research, where teachers were able to bring about playfulness even under circumstances full of uncertainties created by children. I think the "active ingredient" there was a playful mindset, which is the key to



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navigating uncertainties. With that in mind, rather than dwell on a 'ruined' spring break plan, I decided to view it as an opportunity to explore what a day of playfulness might look like.

At 10 am I decided to do something to divert my attention from the stressful news. I glanced at the bedside table and saw my unfinished handcraft DIY wooden miniature dollhouse model kit that I bought so long ago and had never finished due to lack of time. I opened the dusty box, trying to re-familiarize myself with those tiny components and complex instructions. I gradually lost myself in the cozy mini-house I made and started to imagine the feeling of lying on the soft bed with dim light from the roof and spring breeze from the window. This attracted my full attention. There was no more space in my mind to worry about the virus and the news. Surprisingly, it didn't take too long for me to complete the last piece of the house. A giant amount of satisfaction filled my heart. Looking at the complex yet delicate furniture I made by myself, I felt like those tiny parts were something in my life I could take control of and a feeling of pride arose as I thought back on the technically demanding work I did on my own. This unplanned playfulness ignited a desire to try out more unplanned things.



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The DIY miniature house model



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At 12:30 pm I joined my roommates in cooking spicy food, which I used to reject immediately because of the fear of making a fool of myself if I could not bear the burning taste. It turned out that I started to love the taste and the most fascinating element about this trial was the feeling of not being frightened and taking risks! Different from the coziness and satisfaction after completion of the dollhouse, this time, the playful mindset brought up a sense of surprise and empowerment.



The spicy food

I found more playfulness in a game I played on my mobile phone at 2:00 pm and in an online dance class I participated in at 4:00 pm. Time flew fast. Soon it was 11 pm and I was sitting at my table, reading a book I bought long ago. This brought me some inner peace and serenity.



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Concentrating was not hard when I fully immersed myself in the book's fantasy world and the twists and turns of the heroine's life. I was travelling without leaving home.

At 12:00 am, lying on the bed, I thought back on the day I just experienced. Although it began with panic and anxiety, it ended up being peaceful and relaxing. Having a playful mindset helped me to stay positive and keep an eye out for inspiration, as opposed to my typical day full of endless schoolwork and running from place to place. It's a mindset that made me enjoy the present and the process, whatever the results might be.

I note that this is not quarantine-special; this is something I can actually apply to my daily life. Thinking about the days when I don't need to self-distance, do I have the patience to complete a task requiring carefulness and time? Do I take a look at my friends around who offer company that I take for granted? Do I have the braveness to challenge myself and take a step forward in learning new things? Or do I have the inner peace to enjoy the present and fully immerse myself into it?



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May 15, 2020

Joint Pretend Play at Home: Parents and Children as Play Partners

Sarah O. Weiler, guest author



Every pretend play situation is replete with choices to be made and problems to be solved. Whole wheat or white pasta? Plastic, paper or cloth grocery bags? Coupons, cash, check, credit card?

Joint pretend play has been shown to create a zone of proximal development (zpd)* for children's cognitive, physical, social and emotional growth. Joint pretend play positions children and adults as play partners, collaboratively creating make-believe play together.

Children's learning is exponentially potencialized through joint pretend play, as adults support the expansion of children's conceptual resources and their depth of understanding across many different disciplines. This approach helps children make more informed decisions in play, and, as play creates a zpd, it empowers them to make more meaningful and intentional



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decisions in their real life. Yet this form of play challenges popular conceptions that adults should not interfere in children's play at risk of hijacking the play situation from children and imposing the adult pedagogic objectives on them. This concern is valid; parents must resist the impulse to take over the play situation when engaging in play as their children's play partners. This involves calibrating the leading and following positions in joint pretend play to truly collaborate with children in developing the imaginary situation of play together.



Pedagogic Play

sarah oatney weiler

02:25

Parents and children in joint pretend play collaboratively take on roles, build scenarios with props, and create scripts in imaginary situations. In joint pretend play, each participant makes offers to the other players to shape the emerging play situation. The dynamic of joint pretend play is a continuous, collaborative building process, with each idea offered as if a new thread woven into an intricate tapestry. Each thread seamlessly joins with the other threads, just as each offer joins with the other offers. Each offer should seamlessly build upon the previous one into a singular, collaborative story. The roles are the characters, the scenarios with props are the setting and the scripts are the plot. Parents and children



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make offers continuously to develop the play situation, carefully building what each one offers as the pretend play situation becomes increasingly more complex and sophisticated.



Joint pretend play not only involves enacting the imaginary situation by taking on roles and creating scripts, it also involves preparing the scenario and props. Here children prepare signs for the grocery store.

What is an offer? Using a household object as a prop in the imaginary situation or making a prop from materials on hand is an offer. Adding new elements to the scenario or redesigning its organization is an offer. Creating roles, with responsibilities and specific characteristics, is another. Framing problems and proposing solutions that develop the emerging play script, is yet another. These offers can be made by children or parents while actively engaged in the play situation or while discussing and reflecting upon it (when not actively playing) to plan how to enrich the play further. Both moments, inside and outside of the active play situation, give children the opportunity to make



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important contributions in molding play according to their needs and wishes and give parents the chance to support their children's development -- especially the expansion of their conceptual understanding about how the world and human relations work as they make meaning through play.



While playing together, parents can broaden and deepen children's understanding of important concepts involved in the pretend play situation through reading a story or exploring an image.

Offers in joint pretend play can be loosely planned in advance, yet how other play partners respond cannot be predicted with certainty. Joint pretend play should emerge from parents and children's offers, as they reflexively build upon one another's offers collaboratively. Joint pretend play necessarily entails openness and active responsiveness, as parents and children take turns leading and following by making offers that build upon what has been previously offered and guiding the further development of the imaginary play situations being created together. The way that parents calibrate their offers in response to their children's offers can amplify how their children see and act in the world around them, as



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it relates to the pretend play situation they enact. Parents can even make offers that challenge children to respond ethically or take a stance toward what they've done (such as the parent taking on the role of a shoplifter or of a child throwing a tantrum in a store). Parents can prompt children with questions and build up their repertoire of ideas about the roles, scenarios, props and scripts that comprise it. Parents can also engage children in stories and investigations about the pretend play situation, importantly involving the concepts that constitute it. This empowers children to generate proposals for how they can engage in play together, making offers and taking a leading position to guide the development of joint pretend play.



Children engage in grocery shopping with their shopping lists.



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In order to illustrate these points, imagine playing the pretend situation of going grocery shopping. Parents and children can set up grocery store scenarios with props that they have at home, take on different roles and create a variety of problem-solving scripts



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together. Parents' offers can broaden children's understanding of a vast array of possibilities for action in the pretend play situation (and the world), problematizing what those actions follow from (their historical and cultural origin) and what follows from those actions (consequences). For instance, the customer (parent) can make an offer to the grocery store clerk (child) by asking where the organic produce section is, if a product is non-GMO, what they'd recommend for a low-fat diet or what is on sale. Underlying all of these offers are important concepts (diet, health, environmental sustainability, budgeting, finances, etc.) which parents can introduce into the pretend play situation at opportune moments.

Responding to children's offers collaboratively can be another way to explore concepts in play. For example, a child could make an offer to a parent by saying, "Oh, no, we've run out of strawberries!" The parent could build with this offer by saying, "Yes, and our bakery was going to make strawberry shortcake today. What are we going to do?" In this way, the parent heightens the emotive intensity of the play situation by building upon the initial problem. If the child is reticent to respond, the parent could think aloud, "I wonder if we should call the strawberry farm to see when the next shipment will arrive" (linking to concepts related to where food comes from) or "Our blueberries are going to go bad in another day, what could we make with them instead?" (linking to the concept of decomposition) to support the child's next offer. These offers build up the play script, while making offers of different



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possible scenarios with props (How about an all-organic, bulk-based food co-op or fair trade discount brand grocery store?) and roles (Why not a small owner run grocery store or a large unionized grocery with a butcher, baker, florist, pharmacist, etc.?) are other ways to collaboratively develop the pretend play situation.

Now more than ever, as all the people of the world deal with a global pandemic and many are socially distancing or isolating, children have less opportunities to play with other children and reap the pedagogic benefits of a play-based learning approach at school. For this reason, parents have an opportunity to engage with greater frequency in joint pretend play with their children as play partners at home. When parents and children engage in pretend play together, making offers and building upon them jointly, children learn more about the world, human relationships and themselves. They develop their ability to make their own decisions in life and take responsibility for them. They are empowered to lead meaningful lives and design their futures, all while enjoying the time that their parents are fully present with them in the moment to create something uniquely their own.

—

* The zone of proximal development (zpd) is what a child can do in collaboration, which he/she is unable to do yet independently. Vygotsky argued that the zpd is more indicative of a child's development than what he/she can do independently as it



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demonstrates the emerging capabilities of the child.



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Sarah O. Weiler is the founder of Contemporary Education and the creator of Pedagogic Play (an early childhood curriculum). She is a doctoral student at University College London - Institute of Education and has been a teacher and school leader for over 20 years in the USA and abroad.



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May 22, 2020

Lessons in Playful Learning: Improvisation in Play

Samantha LeVangie

Samantha is a former Lead Preschool teacher and educational researcher who recently graduated from the Human Development and Psychology program at HGSE. She is passionate about supporting teachers and students in the early childhood classroom, and is particularly interested in the ways that schools promote the mental, physical and emotional well-being of ECE educators. Samantha worked as a research assistant on the Pedagogy of Play project for the 2019-20 school year, observing classrooms and talking with teachers and school leaders about playful learning in the US educational context.



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My creative outlet is Improvisational Comedy, and I've been performing now for four years. If you've never seen an improv show, I'll give you a brief run-down of what to expect: a group of six or so adults will run on stage and get a random suggestion of a word from the audience. That word will then inspire a 30- or 60-minute long story (and the result is often hilarious).

There is no telling what will happen until the first scene starts. The entire show is made up on the spot, and the performers and audience get to live in a constant state of surprise, finding joy in the choices the performers make on stage. It is an environment of constant risk-taking. But it's not all that scary, because with this risk-taking comes a form of security. Improv performers work hard to build a trusting environment with each other. As a performer, I feel confident going on stage with no preparation, because I know my castmates will be there by my side to support me.

For the past several months, the Pedagogy of Play research team has been in and out of schools across Boston observing what makes learning playful. During observations and in reflecting on my own experience as a preschool teacher, I've noticed so much overlap between the ways performers work to create a playful environment for improvisation, and the ways teachers create a playful environment to foster learning in the classroom.



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The golden rule is “Yes, and...”



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The number one ‘rule’ of improv is “Yes, and...”. When someone makes a choice in a scene, you say “Yes” and build on that idea. This rule implies that there are no “wrong” choices. How can there be, if everything is made up? If your castmate walks on stage and says, “It’s hard work, being a cat,” you agree. You are cats, and cats don’t have it easy. They have to lick their fur themselves! They have to find a proper place to nap, and must meow to remind their humans that it is time to be fed! How outrageous that they must do so many things for themselves. Now the scene will move forward, both of you cats, coming up with a plan for how to trick your humans into pampering you more so you can sit in the window and watch the squirrels scamper by. If you hear “it’s hard work, being a cat” and think “I’m not a cat!” or “That’s a weird thing to say,” you’ll make the other improviser feel like they did something wrong, which often shuts down any feeling of playfulness.



My first improv team, Coyote, performing together



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In order for classroom learning to feel playful, students in the classroom should feel like the ideas they offer are gifts. They should feel that even when their answer to a question is objectively wrong, their thinking and their effort is valued and accepted. For the teacher, this sometimes means taking a student's idea and running with it.

Christine, a fourth grade teacher at the Advent school in Boston, says during an interview that the moments that feel most playful to her are the ones where she acknowledges she doesn't have all the answers and instead gets to be "innovative" with her students. For her, that means that while building pyramids during a unit on ancient Egypt, she leaves the task open-ended and lets her students ideas for how to build drive the objectives for her lesson. During that same unit a few weeks later, students are writing their own myths. When it is time to clean up, Christine notices how passionate students are about their characters in the story – some even acting like them. She runs with it, and encourages the entire classroom to clean up while in character, resulting in students laughing together while performing an otherwise routine task.



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A student coordinates clean up while in the character of a smart, organized leader from her story. Her classmate pretends to be a grumpy old woman following directions.

Celebrate failure

Sometimes the best scenes in improv are the ones that go sideways. The scenes where the improvisors on stage are so overwhelmed with how ridiculous this is, that they break character and start laughing. When things get crazy or take a turn for the unexpected – like someone forgets a character's name – we take it as an opportunity to make the scene even better. Instead of thinking "That was awful," we think, "That surprised me! I wonder how we can make it work." When we get bogged down with feelings of failure and regret, we can't go on with the show and maintain a playful mindset. Welcoming failure is necessary, because on stage you'll fail a million times before you get it right. Instead of fearing failure, improvisors work to be curious about it. They problem solve to think of ways they might turn "failure" into something great.



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In a recent show, we got an item from the audience – a tote bag – and when placed on my head it transformed me into a fish

In the classroom, it can be easy for students to feel overcome by feelings of failure and frustration. Living in that space makes it that much harder to persevere. For failure to be playful, students and teachers need to be curious about failure. They need to see failure not as an outcome, but as a sign that they should try something in a different way. Failure can be an opportunity to spark play if it is faced with curiosity and seen as an opportunity for growth. And while failure can be upsetting, it can also be funny! Did that model pyramid you build fall down? Let the falling be joyful, an opportunity to try to build it a little bit differently. Laugh in surprise. And then see it as an opportunity to build the model again, stronger and taller than before.



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Build community

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Performing an entirely made-up show wouldn't be possible if the improvisors didn't feel a sense of belonging with one another. People ask me all the time, "Why do you need to rehearse improv, if it's all made up?" My answer is that our shows can only succeed if we feel bonded and connected to the people we're performing with. Performance comes hand-in-hand with feelings of vulnerability, and it is so much harder to be vulnerable in a room of unfamiliar faces than on stage with a group of people you know and trust. To do that work, we check in with each other. We show up to each other's shows and applaud each other's work. We develop a respect for the skills that each person brings to a performance, which then instills a sense of confidence that brings us back up even when we're feeling down.

Just as performing can make you feel vulnerable, so can learning. Nothing makes you feel more vulnerable than admitting there is something you don't know, and school is built on the idea that students don't know things. Students in the classroom, when faced with a question they do not know the answer to, might feel exposed. How can we expect our students to engage in playful learning experiences when they are feeling vulnerable? One answer is to build community. Teachers can foster playful classroom environments by bonding with their students, and giving their students an opportunity to bond with each other. To do that work, teachers check in with their students, and students check in with each other when they get stuck. There are opportunities for members of the



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classroom community to applaud each other's work and demonstrate respect for the unique skillset each student brings to the table. Building a bonded, respectful, and supportive community can help that feeling of vulnerability subside.

When the lights go up on stage and I'm faced with an hour-long improvised show, my fear and vulnerability subside when I see my castmates' encouraging expressions. "We're in this together," I think to myself. Although I don't know exactly what will happen on stage, I do know that I will feel supported endlessly by a group of peers that know and respect me. Armed with that knowledge, I feel ready to tackle any challenge.



My first improv team, Coyote, on stage together to try a new style of improv for the first time



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May 29, 2020

Processing the pandemic: two opportunities

Ben Mardell

Stress. Uncertainty. Fear. Grief. Just some of the emotions many of us are feeling as we confront COVID-19. In light of these emotions, we want to alert you to two endeavors put together by friends of the Pedagogy of Play project, each offering a way to process the current state of the world.

#WeUsedTo

A collaboration between [Studio Olafur Eliasson](#) in Berlin and the [Interacting Minds Centre \(IMC\)](#) at Aarhus University in Denmark, [#WeUsedTo](#) is an invitation to share reflections on COVID-19 pandemic experiences. It is a space to explore and to share.

Visiting the site, you will be prompted to use an adaptation of a [thinking routine](#) from [Project Zero](#) called "[I used to think...Now I think.](#)" What did you think/value/feel/worry about before the pandemic? What do you think/value/feel/worry about now?

You can also see responses from people from around the world -- some very sad and some optimistic. For example, Ki Taek from South Korea shared:



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I used to think making plans was a good way to get where I wanted to go.

Now I think that maybe life cannot be planned.

Akanksha in India shared:

We used to imagine blue skies in Delhi.

Now we know how magnificent they look.

Daniella wrote:

I used to hold back my tears.

Now I cry.

The #WeUsedTo initiative is also a [research project](#). A team is analyzing statements, and will share trends and important ideas they find. Why? As the group eloquently explains:

[I]t is not just the virus that spreads. Emotions, uncertainties, facts, beliefs and experiences propagate fast and in many directions. Keeping bodies at a safe distance has proven to be critical for making it difficult for the virus to get from one person to another. Sharing experiences and reflections may be important for us to figure out how to live together in world, where COVID-19 is likely to be around for a while



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Hope, where are you?

 Made in Webflow



A children's book written by educators Armand Doucet and Elisa Guerra and illustrated by Ana Ragu, **Hope, Where Are You?** is the story of six children from around the world who are facing school closures and other disruptions to their lives because of the pandemic. Each child experiences frustration and challenge, and finds their hope which they share with others.

There is Nikau from Oceania whose family has had to move from the city to the countryside. Missing friends and feeling isolated, Nikau is encouraged by his older brother to build their old neighborhood out of cardboard. They populate the neighborhood with icons of the virus on tin cans, and play a very fun and empowering game where they knock the cans over with their rugby ball. There is Mulu from Africa who is missing school, in part because of her dream of becoming a teacher. At her father's suggestion, Mulu begins teaching her entire family math. And there is Kate from North America who is bored at home and is driving her older brothers and parents crazy by bouncing off the walls. She winds up using yoga to center herself, teaching it to her whole family ([here is International School of Billund P.E. teacher Kathrin Schaller reading the chapter on Kate to some of her students](#)).





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A week later, I am leading my family through Mrs. Robinson's Yoga! I'm finishing with the tree pose. I'm really good at this, even my brothers can see it.

"Thank you, Kate," Mom says. "What a wonderful way to start the day."

I feel helpful. I feel wanted. I feel like myself. Finding that warm and fuzzy feeling keeps me calm and focused all day.



Colleagues at the LEGO Foundation have created active, playful activities associated with each of the children: how to create an obstacle course for Nikau; playful math activities about numbers, shapes, and patterns for Mulu; and yoga poises for Kate.

Volunteer educators have translated the text, which is currently available in 23 languages. You can [download the book and activities](#) for free.

Recognizing that children and families don't have equal resources to face the challenges of the pandemic, there is an associated fundraiser with the goal of raising 1 million US dollars for the [UNICEF COVID-19 Response](#).

At a time when children around the world are wondering and worrying about what the future holds, **Hope, Where Are You?** provides an entry point for discussions about what children around the world are experiencing.



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June 19, 2020

Playful Home Learning Series: #8

Samantha LeVangie

We return this week to our home learning series, examining what playful teaching and learning look like during a time of prolonged school closures. That we are talking about play and playfulness during this global crisis doesn't mean we don't take the situation seriously. We are deeply saddened by the ongoing loss of life and continued toll this outbreak will take. Yet as educators who understand the value of learning through play, we feel a responsibility to help playful learning continue for the many children who are at home.

Supporting All Students – Lessons



PROJECT ZERO

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from the Eliot School

by **Samantha LeVangie**

When the Eliot K-8 Innovation School in Boston, Massachusetts closed in mid-March due to the COVID-19 outbreak, teachers and staff banded together to prepare for an unprecedented transition to remote education. It was not an easy transition, but over the following months, teachers and students worked hard to settle into their new normal.

As remote learning kicked off, the Eliot School focused “phase 1” of the transition on providing social-emotional supports to their students. Above all, Traci Griffith – the Executive Director of the K-8 school – wanted to maintain students’ sense of community and connection to their school, and to ensure that regardless of their learning environment, students and teachers still embodied the Eliot’s guiding principles: to be responsible, respectful, safe, kind and inclusive.

This early focus has paid off: close to 100% of students are engaged in remote learning, a strong achievement as many other schools across the country cope with extremely low attendance in a remote learning environment.

“Connecting with families and students in a personalized way is the lever,” Traci explains. “If you use and strengthen those relationships, if kids feel safe, they’ll work harder, ask good questions, and feel okay being vulnerable.”

While the Eliot school has had a lot of success in their transition to remote



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learning, there is one ongoing challenge that Traci says keeps her “up at night.” This challenge is how to best serve the needs of their students with special rights, a term Traci prefers to use for its inclusiveness. Many students at the Eliot receive individualized services, such as English learners, high needs students, and students with disabilities. These are the students who are traditionally provided services such as speech therapy, applied behavioral analysis therapy, occupational therapy, or additional one-on-one support within the classroom.

In a remote learning environment, providing the one-on-one, individualized support and attention these students need is difficult for students and teachers alike. Schools across the country – and parents at home - have been grappling with this same problem, trying to provide the services these students are rightfully owed in a setting that makes teachers’ and specialists’ jobs even harder.

The Eliot School community has tackled that problem head-on, coming up with their own methods and best practices to answer the question: “What can we do to best support and engage all of our students in remote learning?” The answer teachers and staff have come up with is to establish a stable routine, get creative, and maintain a playful learning environment.

Establishing Routine and Making Time

The impact of a disruption of routine and predictability on her students was a



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huge concern for Amanda Murphy, a third-grade teacher at the Eliot School. Right away, she focused on creating a predictable routine for her classroom. “I found it necessary to do the same thing at the same time every day,” Amanda notes. Her class day runs from 9am to 2pm, starting with a morning meeting to give students the opportunity to come together as a whole class.

Each Sunday, she sends out a message to set expectations for students and parents on what their weekly schedule will entail. She gives her students “confidence to take risks by using activities that are similar enough week to week.” Amanda’s students understand at the start of a new assignment what the length of the project will be and what the expectations are for how the work will be completed.

For students that need one-on-one support, Amanda prioritizes giving those students more face time with her by scheduling 20- or 30-minute individual or small group sessions throughout the week. She knows which of her students can be more independent in their work or have more supports available to them at home. So, when she can, Amanda dedicates her extra time to supporting the families of students who need the extra support and whose families may not have the capacity to support them with their schoolwork.

Traci encourages teachers to be just as mindful about the environment and setting for learning in a remote environment as teachers are in a physical classroom. For a boy in the



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upper school who has documented difficulty communicating, a whole-classroom video call was not the right environment for him to share his writing. But in a small group breakout room that Traci was in, this boy openly and enthusiastically shared the connections he was making between the ongoing pandemic and what he was reading in a fiction book about a different society. It is important, she emphasizes, to give students your individual time when possible and be purposeful about how you provide instruction remotely so that all students have access to an environment that makes them feel comfortable sharing their ideas.

Getting Creative

Phase 1 of transitioning to on-line learning also meant ensuring equitable access to materials for students at home. This meant getting reliable internet access for students without. It meant pooling community resources to distribute materials and manipulatives such as writing instruments, LEGO bricks, magnet tiles, and paper. And in the cases where delivering materials for a lesson wasn't feasible, it meant getting creative with the way a lesson was delivered to ensure students didn't require extensive supplies to access the material.

Speech therapists put together social groups where students come together for a "lunch bunch" to eat and just talk about different topics. They build together and talk through the process, and watch videos and re-tell stories about the videos. Given that students have limited and varied access to



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materials, occupational therapists get creative with just a paper and a marker. Capturing and sustaining students' attention is key, so even when the materials don't change, specialists try to refrain from repeating the same task over and over to keep engagement high.

Amanda also finds herself thinking about her lessons through a lens of creativity. How can her students access a math lesson on area and perimeter in a fun, creative way? The answer Amanda and her team came up with was to have them design their dream bedrooms. On Amanda's classroom FlipGrid – a space where students can post pictures and videos of the work they've done in the classroom – students posted a video of them sharing their dream bedroom design and talking about them with pride.



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But students weren't just having fun – they were engaging deeply in critical thinking. One student wanted to add a circular jacuzzi to his room but wasn't sure how to find the area of a circle. He wrote a note to his teacher asking how to do it. Students were so engaged with the project that Traci shared it in the school's weekly newsletter, as a shining example of how teachers can be creative with their lessons in a way that allows students to drive their own learning.

Keeping it Playful by Building Community

While maintaining connection and routine were important for the early stages of this transition, Amanda and Traci both note that the key to sustaining engagement in this environment is playful learning. Amanda says that making online learning playful does two important things for her students. First, it builds connection: “[Our classroom meets] as a group for academics, but we also meet for many other things,” Amanda notes. During one morning meeting, after her class has five minutes of designated “free talk” time, the class all watched a YouTube video of a family giving a tutorial on how to draw ice cream cones, and the students and Amanda all drew ice cream cones together. For Amanda, this type of connection is important for building community outside of academic work.



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Traci also leans on playful moments to builds up a sense of larger school community. On a Friday while giving shout-outs to the members of the school community doing amazing work, Traci filmed and shared a video of herself and her two kids doing a dance together. Modeling these playful moments for members of her school is important to her, because she believes it builds community not just with students but with families. "If families don't feel connected to their school, if they feel they can't reach out, problems are exacerbated," Traci explains. Building community gets ahead of these problems, by creating an environment that feels safe and fun for everyone at the school, at a time where feelings of safety and joy may be hard to come by.

Connection, not perfection

When asked what advice she would give to other teachers and school leaders struggling with the transition to helping all their students in a remote learning environment, Traci has one message she would like to share:

"What I learn almost every day is it's not about perfection, it's about connection. The connections you have with students and families as educators, that's the most important part of any successful remote learning environment."

Samantha is a former member of the PoP research team and a current



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Research Associate at the American Institutes for Research. In her research, she is particularly interested in the ways that schools support the mental, physical and emotional well-being of teachers and students in the classroom (remote or otherwise).



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June 27, 2020

We have the right to play! A Kindergarten Inquiry

Bethany Greene, guest author

Bethany Greene is a kindergarten teacher and educational consultant with a degree in Mind, Brain, and Education from Harvard Graduate School of Education. Beth has worked in the field of early childhood education for over fifteen years, and has consulted on projects at Scholastic Education and at the EASEL Lab at HGSE. Within her child-centered classroom, curricula emerges from the questions and interests of her students, empowering them to question and enact change in the ever-evolving world around them.



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Within education circles, we discuss the importance of play, but how often do students get involved in that discourse? This year, my kindergarteners joined the conversation. Little did we know that this inquiry on play would connect so profoundly to our current lives as homebound learners.

Wants vs. Needs: Initial Ideas

At the start of this year, my class began investigating the concept of wants vs. needs. So often, children express frustration about needing a turn on the swing or needing a particular purple crayon. As a class, I asked them to consider whether these were things that they actually needed, or simply wanted. From there, we explored the broader question: what is it that all children need to grow into thriving adults? My students listed healthy food, water, shelter, medicine, education, and family among a child's basic needs.



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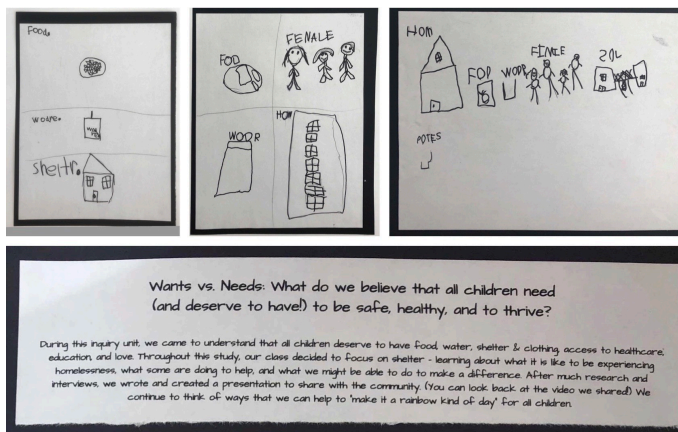
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Research: What else do our bodies need?

With these initial concepts in place, my class spoke with representatives from Horizons for Homeless Children, an organization devoted to improving the lives of homeless children in Massachusetts. This interview coincided with a particularly frigid New England week. After three days of being stuck inside, the kids felt the absence of the chance for unstructured and undirected “big body play.” The representatives from Horizons shared with us that one of the most important components of their shelters are the Playspaces. They explained to the kindergartners that, in order to thrive, kids need safe spaces to move their bodies and to play. Feeling their own restless energy that week, my students were inclined to agree.

To confirm this inclination, we turned to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. According to this comprehensive list of children’s rights, all children have the right to play.

Initially, none of the kids had considered adding play to the list of children’s



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needs - like so many in today's society, they were conditioned to think of play as an indulgence rather than a necessity. To better understand why play is so essential, the kids met with and interviewed experts, including Ben Mardell and Lynneth Solis from the Pedagogy of Play project. They explained that play is the way that all creatures (not just humans) learn. *The kids were convinced: play is something that they need, not just something that they want.*

What gets in the way of their right to play?

Next, I asked the class to consider what was required to fulfill that need. They determined that kids needed the following: energy (from things like healthy food, clean water, a warm bed, and good medicine), a safe (enough) space, love, imagination, and time. Many of our conversations circled back to the concept of time. My students are fortunate to have access to most of these elements, but they explained to me that they often didn't have time to play. One student explained that Wednesday was her only "free day", and for another Friday was his only day "to relax." Notably, my students recognized that other children weren't needed for effective play. They could play alone as effectively as with their friends, a fortunate realization, given what was to come.

School Interrupted

Our classroom explorations of play were abruptly interrupted by the orders to shelter-in-place. In the following weeks,



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parents across the nation took to Pinterest to post minute-by-minute “homeschool” schedules that included reading, writing, math, snack, recess, PE, music, and art.

I despaired that an opportunity was being squandered to allow children the free time that they needed - and to engage in a national discourse about the value of play and unstructured time in a child’s day. Children had the opportunity to reclaim some sense of control and responsibility throughout their day. I encouraged the families in my class to pause and consider relaxing these schedules in favor of constructive alternatives such as stabilizing routines, new household responsibilities, and opportunities for play. I assured them that - as the kids had learned from their research - rich learning was embedded within and would continually evolve from playful pursuits.

Story Workshop: At Home Edition

I was inspired in the following weeks when I received emails from parents about the stories their kids, unprompted, had created. My class had spent the prior months engaged in Story Workshop, a writing curriculum based in play. Those storytelling skills (including careful handwriting for writing and then reading their stories), had translated to motivated and meaningful at-home learning.



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"This is the story about monsters attacking a city and people fighting back, and there is a kid stuck in the elevator. Don't worry, his friends save him in the end."



"These are my puppets Greenie and Orangie. They are best friends even though they live in two different places. Greenie has to stay on land and



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Orangie has to stay in the water. They still have lots of fun together."

From what some may have dismissed as simply playing around with puppets and Legos, my quarantined kindergartners had created stories with rich characters, clear structures, and big emotions. Perhaps, even more importantly, they had taken the time during a period of change and uncertainty to play through ideas and emotions that they could not have processed without the opportunity for play.

Looking Forward

In our current state of crisis, the reality around wants vs. needs seems more pertinent than ever. The children in my class are privileged to be safe at home, with their basic needs met. I ask them each day how they are doing, and while they miss their friends and classroom community, they report that they are happy because they get to spend time with their families and have time to play.

When given the time and space, children are motivated learners. Having recognized and articulated the essential nature of play, my students are empowered in our current isolation to prioritize play as part of their daily education, and not just recreation. When we move beyond the current crisis, I fear that anxiety over lost classroom hours will lead to calls for students to catch up on missed curricula. Instead, I hope we can remember that there are rich opportunities for learning outside of





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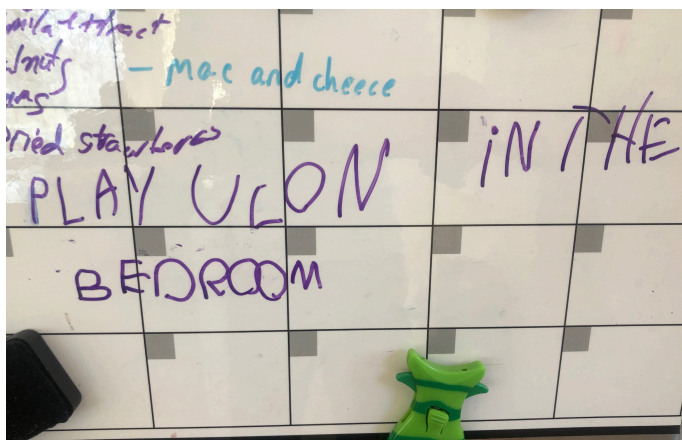
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fixed curricula. Perhaps this disruption to what had become our normal routine can inspire change in how we prioritize this vital need for play in our classrooms and our culture at large.



A reminder from one of my five-year-olds about what must be included each and every day! ("Play alone in the bedroom")



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July 1, 2020

Playful Home Learning Series: #9

We return to our home learning series with three posts from the [Atrium School](#), an independent school in the Boston area. During the past school year, Atrium participated in the [PoP: USA research](#) along with 5 other schools. As the next year may include online or blended teaching for many, how the Atrium teachers maintained their commitment to playful learning in math is instructive.

Playing with Pythagoras: A 7th grade math class

by Ben Mardell

$$a^2 + b^2 = c^2$$

The Pythagorean theorem. To many, a formula memorized in middle or high school used to calculate the side lengths of right triangles in order to answer questions on tests.

But an idea to play with? That is what 7th grade math teacher Liz Caffrey wants her students to do -- play with Pythagoras' idea in order to have a



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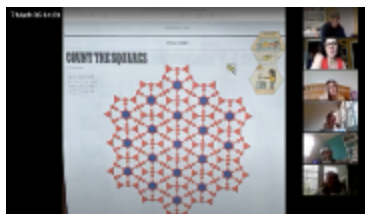
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better understanding of the concept. Liz's 45-minute zoom lesson in mid-May follows a format familiar to her students from the time they were physically together. They begin with "Math from the world." Liz explains that, "today's offering, in the spirit of fun and randomness, is from the New York Times' puzzle mania." Liz shares her screen and encourages the students to count how many squares they see.



As class verbally discusses where they see squares, students also type into the chat section:

Max: I don't see any

Sophia: Same

Mira : I see them!!

Avery : Me too!!!

Rachel: me too!!

Camilo: I see the squares too

Camilo: Cool

Sophia : OH MY



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Sophia : I SEE THEM

Sophia : AND I CANT UNSEE THEM

As the chat unfolds, Liz highlights some of the squares on the screen. She draws the conversation to an end with a reference to The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy: "There is a total of 42 total squares, which is the meaning of life, which is important for you to know."

The next part of the class is a deep dive into the main topic of the day, a better understanding of the Pythagorean Theorem and its proofs. Liz reviews the class's previous explorations where they had "discovered" that the area of figures created from sides of a right triangle allows for calculations of the length of sides of those triangles.



Part of the 7th grade on Zoom (the rest of the class is on a second screen)

Picking up on the previous day's conversation, Liz then introduces a game called *Is it a Triangle*. She asks, "Will these three sides make a triangle: three, four and five? Write yes or no in the chat." At first, there is little response from the students so Liz adds:



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Ten seconds to stake your claim. I really recommend you do stake your claim because then you are really on the hook for the answer. Once you put yourself out there your brain is primed to learn something. If you are averse to the risk you're less engaged. Type in an answer. It's OK to be wrong. I won't even remember what you wrote.

Most children type yes. Liz then asks, "How about three, four and ninety-nine?" There is laughter, some very adamant *noes* in the chat (e.g., Rosa: N!!!). Camilo comments that it is "a triangle wannabe."

After some further explanation, it is time to play. Liz explains that in small groups they will be exploring different geometric proofs of the theorem which can be manipulated on the computer screen. Each proof has a different right triangle whose sides are part of another shape—in some cases triangles and in other cases squares or hexagons (see diagram below). The shapes that border sides a and b of the triangle are split into colored "puzzle pieces" that can be moved into the shape bordering side c . That the pieces fit neatly into the third shape is proof that a^2 (the area of the first shape) plus b^2 (the area of the third shape) is equal to c^2 (the area of the third shape).

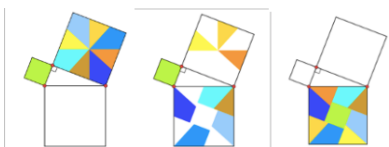
Liz asks the students to play with the proofs and share what they are noticing.



PROJECT ZERO

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One of the geometric proofs. Students can move the colored pieces from the top two squares to the bottom square. Seeing the “puzzle pieces” from the top two squares fit neatly into the bottom one is proof of the theorem.

In breakout room three, there is some initial frustration on how the proofs work. After a few minutes, the students have sorted this out and the following conversation unfolds:

Rosa: I like this second one

Hannah: They all fit together, nice.

Rachel: This is fun

Hannah: The second one is pretty

Rosa: So is the fourth one

Rachel: Are we discussing what we notice?

Rosa: Yeah, I think





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Rachel: Okay, what do you guys notice?

Hannah: I notice that we never had to rotate

Rosa: Yeah

Rachel: You can change the shape on this

Hannah: What did you say Rachel?

Rachel: That is cool

Hannah: Woo, ten is crazy

Rachel: Woo, seven is crazy

Rosa: Woo, seven is really pretty

Rachel: Ten is super cool

Hannah: Wooooooooo. This is cool

Rosa: Ten!

Rachel: Ten is super cool. What is it showing?



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Rosa: There is kind of a pattern. One of the squares is broken into four triangles and another square

goes in the center.

Rachel: Can I share my screen for a minute?

Rosa: Sure, sure.

Rachel: If you do this it will make two squares

Rosa: Oh, that's cool

Hannah: My dad is blasting Twist and Shout downstairs and I don't know why

Rachel: You can make it into two squares and I don't know why.

As students return from the breakout rooms Liz asks, "how was that for an amount of playtime? Too much? Not enough? Just right goldilocks amount?" A few call out yes, while there are a couple of noes recorded in the chat. Liz will take this input into consideration for the next session.

To end class, Liz walks the students through an extension of the Pythagorean Theorem, a proof involving hexagons rather than squares. It turns



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out that the sums of the areas of any shape built off of the two legs of a right triangle will always equal the area of the same shape built off of the hypotenuse! Liz adds that the proofs they explored were visual proofs; the next day they will do an algebraic proof together, which is “both rewarding and challenging.”

During distance learning, it was important to Liz to preserve as much of a sense of normalcy to her class as possible. So she maintained the routines of class over Zoom, and kept math learning playful and exploratory. As distance learning “fatigue” set in after spring break, Liz changed the warmups to make them lighter and more fun, altering the theme each week to promote student enjoyment and also to gauge how students were feeling that day before diving into math. A surprising side effect of distance learning was how much students utilized the chat feature to share their thinking, allowing quieter students to have more of a voice in class. A particularly exciting achievement during distance learning was that Liz and her middle school team were able to make their month-long interdisciplinary, end of year project go entirely online. Students were able to use collaborative whiteboards, simulators, and 3D modeling software to make scale models of community centers situated in different areas of the world.

Liz Caffrey is the middle school math teacher at Atrium. She will be sharing more about her teaching practices, in particular how she creates projects that



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connect math and social justice, at
[Atrium's summer math institute](#), July 20-
24. Come play!

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July 10, 2020

Playful Home Learning Series: #10

We return to our home learning series with this second post from the [Atrium School](#), an independent school in the Boston area. During the past school year, Atrium participated in the [PoP: USA research](#) along with 5 other schools. As the next year may include online or blended teaching for many, how the Atrium teachers maintained their commitment to playful learning in math is instructive.

Ten plus ten plus ten...plus ten is a big number!: A 1st grade math small group

by Ben Mardell

In a breakout room* Bader and Julia are discussing adding and multiplying groups of tens. Bader exclaims, "These are big numbers!" Because it gets them past one hundred quickly, first graders are intrigued by counting up by tens. They love big numbers.



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Learning different strategies for grouping tens, gaining automaticity in adding and multiplying by ten, and enjoying math are the learning goals 1st grade teacher Bob Dowling has for Bader, Julia, and their classmates, Oliver and Maya. In a half hour small group zoom call, Bob provides a variety of activities and discussions with all four students and in pairs in the breakout rooms.

The lesson begins with Bob displaying cards, each of which has ten dots. He asks the children how they can figure out how many dots there are in total. After children tell him that for four cards you can use multiplication to get forty, he asks them, "What are you doing when you multiply?"

Maya answers immediately: "You're basically doing ten, four times." Bob follows up: "What are you doing with the tens?"

Maya: We are doing ten plus ten plus ten plus ten basically. And 4×10 is a short way to write it.

Bob: You could have four tens. What else could you use?

Maya: Ten fours equals forty.

Bob's next question -- Which way is more efficient? -- creates an enthusiastic response from all the children, who call out: Tens! Then in quick succession:



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Maya: The multiplication way.

Bader: The least efficient way is ones.

Oliver: Or zeros!

A few minutes later Bob sends the children to break out rooms to consider the problem: There are ninety fingers. If everyone has ten fingers, how many people are there? In their group Bader and Julia struggle, but remain positive. Julia notes, "I know I can ask for help."



Bader and Julia in the breakout room

Bob brings the group back together but does not ask for the answer. Rather, he asks, "who can tell me how they solved the problem?"

Bader: There were ninety fingers and each person has ten. Ninety is you get a nine and then a ten. So it's nine people because everyone has a ten. Bob illustrates Bader's solution on a white board for all to see.



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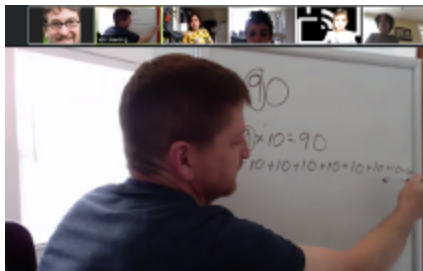
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Bob illustrating Bader's comment

There is time for one more breakout group where the children use playing cards to compare the size of numbers. Bob generally has them use concrete objects—pebbles or even blades of grass—in these virtual lessons.

Returning to the main room, Maya notes, "There are no grownups here. No one can tell us what to do. Let's go and have a party!" Julia adds, "Play with your backgrounds." But before the party can start Bob returns. Bader asks if they can have a party after the lesson. Bob answers, "Not today, but I do have a question. The other math groups were asking if we could have a math group with the whole class where we just play games." There is a chorus of yeses, with Maya declaring it a math party. Bob agrees with the gathering's new name to the delight of all.

Transitioning to distance teaching, Bob and his co-teacher Melissa Burns were initially skeptical that first graders could manage online learning. **They have been heartened by how resilient their children have been in meeting the challenges the transition dealt the group.** While they found whole group gatherings less successful, small groups, both in math and writing and reading were generally positive. As in the lesson described here, the math talk,



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problem solving, and playfulness of in-person teaching was retained.

* Teachers at the Atrium use the online platform Zoom for their lessons. One feature of Zoom is that teachers can create “breakout rooms” and assign smaller numbers of learners to specific groups. Teachers can visit these rooms and then bring the class back together in the “main room.” Another Zoom feature is a chat box where participants can send text messages to individuals or the whole group. In this session, Bob discourages the use of the chat feature, noting how sending individual messages is “like whispering to a friend during a conversation” and messaging everyone is akin to “calling out during a class discussion.”



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July 30, 2020

Playful Home Learning Series: #11

We return to our home learning series with a third post from the Atrium School, an independent school in the Boston area. During the past school year, Atrium participated in the PoP: USA research along with 5 other schools. As the next year may include online or blended teaching for many, how the Atrium teachers maintained their commitment to playful learning in math is instructive.

Multiples of nines, square numbers, and the Fibonacci sequence: 5th graders playing with patterns

by Ben Mardell

Since the start of this school year, fifth graders have been discussing the emerging pattern on their monthly calendar, put there by co-teachers Sam Bloch and Diane Foster. As each day brought more data, the children worked to discern what specific symbols meant



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and speculated on what the next day might bring. By February, the class found the icons purchased by their teachers to be a bit boring, so for March there was a competition to select and use a student-made pattern. This continued for April and May.

Meeting virtually at 2:30 pm for an end-of-school day zoom call, the class continued to discuss the calendar pattern. It is May 18th and a pizza slice icon appears. It joins another pizza slice on the 9th, a variety of face symbols, and some smaller emojis (pine trees, lightbulbs and a face with sunglasses).

May 2020						
Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
					1 👑 😊	2 🌲 😊
3 🌲 😊	4 👑 😊	5 🌲 😊	6 😞	7 💡 😊	8 🌲 😊	9 🍕 😊
10 😞	11 😊	12 😊	13 🌲 😊	14 💡 😞	15 😞	16 👑 😊
17 😊	18 🍕	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

The May Calendar (through May 18th)

As the fifth graders join the zoom call, Sam asks in the chat box what they think the pizza slice is about. There is consensus that it involves multiples of nines, and will next appear on the 27th.



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The fifth grade end of day zoom call

Sam then asks about the small emoji with sunglasses that appears on the 1st, 4th, 9th, and 16th. The group quickly concludes that this involves square numbers. With 18 days of data, the class has figured out most of what the monthly pattern involves. But one puzzle remains: the pine trees on the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th, 8th, and 13th.

Diane notes, “this is a really hard one that we haven’t seen before.”

Elyse observes that the pine trees appear on both even and odd days. Then Olivia begins an explanation:

Well, one plus two, one and two, they both have the pine tree. And one plus two is three. Three has another pine tree. And two plus three is five, and five has another pine tree. Five plus three is eight. Eight has another pine tree. And eight plus five is thirteen, and thirteen has another pine tree.

Sam: "So when do we see the next pine tree?" Olivia responds:



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Well thirteen plus eight is twenty, right? So, on the 21st.

Sam: Yeah on Thursday. Thank you Olivia. Now does anyone know what that pattern is famously called? Alright birthday boy, do it." Nate answers:

It's called a Fibonacci sequence. My dad talks about it all the time. He's like, 'this is a Fibonacci sequence' and I'm like 'okay, cool'.

Sam: (laughs) Yeah, it is cool. Fibonacci sequences are awesome. They appear a lot of times in nature and in repeating patterns that you see without even knowing it. So thank you to the person that made this calendar for including the Fibonacci sequence.

Calendar math mysteries solved, the class moves on to talk about a project they are working on and the tasks for tomorrow.

The calendar activity continued in June with a new pattern created by another student. Like past months, the June pattern inspired lively conversations—both verbally during the afternoon meetings, and in the chat area of Zoom. In fact, while Sam clearly prefers in-person teaching, he has been struck by how the chat feature has enabled shier students to share their ideas more frequently. He also notes how continuing the calendar pattern activity helped maintain continuity in the



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transition to distance learning, and supported the feeling of classroom community as he, Diane, and the students discussed current patterns and reminisced about past patterns as well.

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September 14, 2020

Peer to peer teaching: online edition

Ben Mardell

Earlier this year, as COVID spread across the globe and schools began to transition online, we launched a Playful Home Learning Series. We thought this series would be meaningful for one, maybe two months. Yet for many schools around the world, distance and/or hybrid learning is still in effect. Having a separate series seems moot, as online and in person schooling intertwine. We will continue to publish online playful learning and teaching pieces as part of our regular posts, just not under the Home Learning Series label. If you are particularly interested in distance learning, you can curate your own mini-series by clicking the "home



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learning" category on the left.

As schools in the northern hemisphere return after summer break, many will still be in distance learning mode, while others will be trying a hybrid online/in-person model. Educators may therefore continue to grapple with the question: What can playful learning look like online? Well, we've made a video that provides an illustration of online playful learning, highlighting a pedagogy of play strategy of supporting peer to peer teaching.

The example comes from the 4th grade at the [Advent School](#), an independent school serving students from pre-kindergarten through sixth grade in Boston. In the example, co-teachers Christine Dowling and Danielle Tye invite their 4th grade students to teach a lesson to their classmates. Coming at the end of the school year last spring, after instruction had been online for several months, the assignment was an extension of the writing curriculum which focused on expressing ideas clearly.

In the video you will meet Eamon, who teaches his classmates about kind pranking, and Sol, who teaches about how to relieve stress. You'll see parts of their presentations and you'll learn how Christine and Danielle prepared their students for their presentations.

This strategy of peer to peer teaching involves recognizing that children can be effective teachers, and that the adults are not the only teachers in the



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room. It involves providing opportunities for children to learn from one another, and helping children see each other as resources with ideas and skills that can support each other's learning.



Peer to peer
teaching

07:23 fer Ryan

Peer to peer teaching can be spontaneous—a student comes to you with a question and you refer her to other students who might have expertise or have been considering the issue so they can discuss and explore with each other. Peer to peer teaching can be *planful*, with official recognition of children's expertise. For example, teachers at the [International School of Billund](#) in Denmark were finding that students' creative flow in the maker space was being disrupted because children were having to rely on (and wait for) adults to use certain tools, such as the laser printer and the hot glue gun and even the sharp scissors for the kindergartners. So they set up a licensing system so that children can take a test and, if they pass, use tools by themselves and help their peers.

Stay tuned for more posts, and perhaps videos, about other PoP teaching strategies.



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September 28, 2020

Playful inquiry and charged topics

Ben Mardell



Persistent and pernicious racism and inequality. Hurricanes and wildfires of historic proportion. A pandemic that is increasing poverty and causing famines. Incredibly serious issues whose consequences young people will not only confront when they are finished with their schooling, but issues that also are impacting them now on a daily basis. As an educator committed to bringing more playful learning into schools I wonder:

What is the role of schools in addressing these and other serious topics?

How can playful learning support inquiry into serious topics?

What does such playful learning look like in practice?



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On Monday, October 5th my PoP colleague Mara Krechevsky and I, along





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with our friends Susan MacKay and Matt Karlsen from [Opal School](#), will examine these questions. As part of [World Education Week](#), Opal is one of 100 schools from around the globe being showcased for its innovative practices. Our hour-long webinar, *Engaging Ambiguity, Emotion, and Power: Invigorating democratic imagination through Playful Inquiry*, begins at 5 pm GMT (1 pm in New York).

You won't be surprised that our answer to the first question about the role of schools in addressing serious issues is clear: a big one. We believe students, from an early age, have the right to engage, in developmentally appropriate ways, in issues of consequence.

So how can playful learning support inquiry into serious topics, and what does this look like in practice? To answer these questions, Susan and Matt will share a story from Opal they call *Inventing a Way Forward*. The story involves a group of predominantly white, middle-class, 4th and 5th graders and how they and their teachers co-constructed an experience that connected the personal, local, and global – both past and present—to issues involving power and privilege. Specifically, Susan has written:

Throughout the school year the group played out the inevitable kinds of power struggles that are part of the life of any community. As we began studying the operation of the United States government, my co-teacher and I invited the



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children to work collaboratively to design a governing structure for their classroom community. By mid-April, the personal feelings that impacted our local classroom community had a strong resemblance to what we were seeing play out on the world stage. In particular, a group of children that had taken responsibility for operating the classroom library were increasingly livid with another group of children who refused to support the systems they put in place. When the tension began to run especially high, I met with this group and listened to their concerns. Interestingly, the group that was pushing so hard on the library were the children who were most used to being in charge, to voicing their strong opinions, and being listened to by others. Power and privilege is as local as it is global. But only on this local scale do we have a chance to go into it head on—to face it and tackle it in a real way.

At the same time the class read chapters from Ronald Takaki's (2012) young people's edition of *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* and we had another problem. We had asked the children to work in small groups to re-write the experiences of the



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protagonists in a chapter of their choice – both the powerful and the marginalized. We asked them to create a skit that would show what might have happened if things had gone differently and those in power had been willing to share it.

The children said, “Not a problem” and they enjoyed their work as they found ways to retell the history in their chapter. But when the class came together to share for the first time, they discovered that every one of the groups in their own way had the same problem. They could all walk right up to the confrontation – to the moment when the powerful would find a way to redistribute the power making things more equitable -- and then they got stuck. Those with privilege and power had little motivation to give their power away. They all thought those who were oppressed could protest, threaten, or fight back, but they could find no reasonable way for both sides to get the relationship to move in a new, more fair direction. They couldn’t imagine it.

In the October 5th webinar, Susan and Matt will share the rest of the story and how the class found a way forward. We’ll also engage participants in the research process Opal School educators use to supports the creation of



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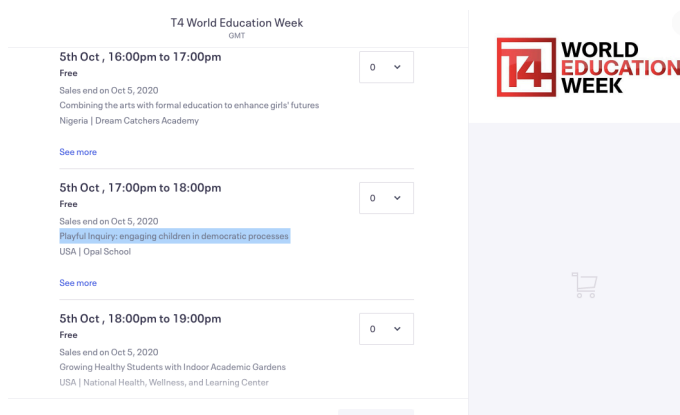
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relationships and learning experiences that lead to meaningful democratic participation.

To sign up for the session use this link:
<https://www.eventbrite.dk/e/t4-world-education-week-tickets-116951472001?aff=Opal>.



Click on the green registration button



Scroll down about 20 listings to 17:00pm to select our session...in the system it's titled **Playful inquiry: engaging children in democratic processes**.

Racism. Wildfires. The pandemic. The issues I named at the start of this post can feel overwhelming and lead to despair. And I have found hope in the commitment, creativity and caring of educators at Opal School, and other



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schools, where young people are given the opportunity and support to engage in these issues and imagine futures where we create more just societies. Similarly, I hope that our session provides you with images of possibilities and promise.



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November 3, 2020

Tipping the Balance of Responsibility for Learning: Middle School Teachers Tinker with the Timetable

Mara Krechevsky

Making room for playful learning in school can be a challenge, especially with older students. To those who consider play a central way people learn, resources such as time, space, and materials can seem scarce. To those who see play as frivolous, promoting playful learning interferes with educational policies that stress efficient coverage of mandated curriculum and externally determined standards (FMI, see our [early PoP paper](#)). What happens when a group of middle school teacher-researchers at the [International School of Billund](#) (ISB), Denmark, join a team of PoP researchers to explore the paradox between the timeless nature of play and the timetabled nature of school?



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The 2017 middle school teacher-researcher team

In the fall of 2017, ISB middle school teachers experimented with tipping the balance of responsibility for learning to the learners themselves by replacing two weeks of the standard school schedule with a 'student-composed schedule,' in which students designed their own timetable. Apart from meeting every morning and afternoon in reflection groups, students could choose when during the day to schedule their subjects. Teachers wrote up instructions for the assignments, along with estimated timeframes, and made themselves available for support upon request. Each student also identified a personal project or area of interest to pursue if they finished their tasks early.

Although the experiment got off to a shaky start, as it progressed, many students capitalized on the opportunity to choose where and with whom to work, and began to view each other as intellectual resources.



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MYP students reflect on how they learn

Students helped each other in unexpected ways—e.g., native Danish and English speakers spontaneously offered to assist peers struggling to learn the other language. For some students, satisfying curiosity became more self-driven than teacher-driven since students were free to pursue individual areas of interest not directly related to the task at hand. However, because the students themselves were responsible for setting the time frame as well as the task parameters, they needed to weigh the tradeoffs when making their decisions. For one student, this led to the realization that

“My learning is for me and it’s me who takes it into the future.”

PoP researcher Ben Mardell talks about the ‘sweet spot’ between school and play as the point when what the teachers want the students to be doing is exactly what the students want to be doing. The atmosphere created by the student-composed schedule seems especially hospitable to fostering this type of overlap.



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To read a more in-depth description of this experience, please see the just-published article, “[Frankly It’s a Gamble: What Happens when Middle School Students Compose their own Schedules?](#)” Or, check out this [great video](#) produced by ISB.



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January 26, 2021

PoP USA Working Papers

Ben Mardell, Lynneth Solis, Katie Ertel

In order to promote playful learning in classrooms and schools, educators need to have clarity about what they are trying to promote: what playful learning looks and feels like. And while playful learning is universal, it is also shaped by culture. The form and content of playful learning needs to be adapted in order to be meaningful in specific contexts.

Motivated by these understandings, during the 2019-20 school year we explored what playful learning looks and feels like in six Boston-area schools. Collaborating with educators committed to creating engaging and meaningful learning experiences for their students, we observed in 17 classrooms—pre-kindergarten to 9th grade. We interviewed these teachers and their school leaders and students about their takes on playful learning.

As the following images convey, we found playful learning across grade levels and subject areas.



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2nd graders creating a math game at the Cambridgeport School



1st graders exploring point of view at the Josiah Quincy School



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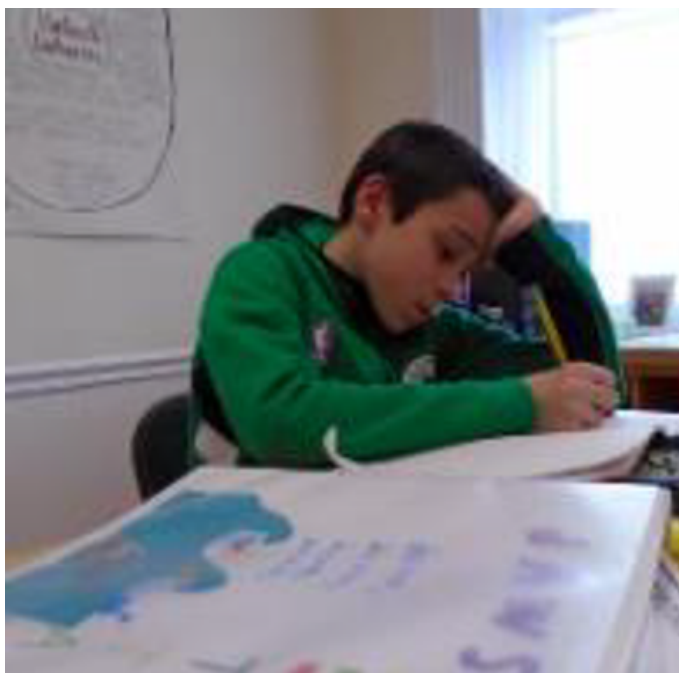
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7th graders preparing a presentation on racism in the U.S. at the Eliot School



5th graders from the Atrium School discussing math patterns on Zoom



A 4th grader writing a myth about the origins of sound at The Advent School



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9th graders working on a language arts assignment at Codman Academy (*photo courtesy Codman Academy*)

The results of our research are shared in two working papers. The first paper, **Empowering, meaningful, and joyful: Playful learning in six schools in the United States**, addresses the question of what playful learning looks and feels like at the schools we collaborated with. At the heart of the paper are “indicators of playful learning” that map out the psychological states (“feels like”) as well as observable behaviors (“looks like”) of playful learning. To illustrate these indicators, we provide examples from a 2nd grade math lesson, a 1st grade English Language Learners classroom, online math instruction in 1st and 5th grade, and a 7th grade Reading and Writing class. The 7th grade example, where students are preparing a presentation about racism in the U.S., helps examine the question of what playful learning looks and feels like when students are investigating and advocating for change around serious topics. The paper also includes a



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description of our research methods, a review of the literature on playful learning in schools in the U.S., and a discussion of the relevance of the indicators model to other U.S. schools.

The second paper, **More than one way: An approach to teaching that supports playful learning**, shares an emerging idea that to activate and cultivate playful mindsets for all students, educators need to be flexible, spontaneous and open to surprise. They need to be playful, taking a more than one way approach to their teaching. The paper unpacks the teaching approach of more than way and provides several classroom examples - from early childhood, primary, and middle school - that illustrate how more than one way supports playful learning. The paper concludes with a discussion about how the idea of more than one way may fit into a pedagogy of play framework.

Both papers are available on the [PoP](#) page of the Project Zero website.



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February 10, 2021

Three Lenses: Play, Pedagogy and Play Pedagogy

Sarah O. Weiler, guest author

A note from popatplay: *In the spirit of condoning an occasional breaking of the rules (ie, doing some risk-taking of our own) we're sharing a post this week that is a bit different in form and tone from our usual. Rather than sharing stories from the classroom, reflections on our research, or ideas we're playing with, this post shares some theoretical underpinnings of learning through play. It comes from an educator and researcher who, in her own words, wanted "not to argue that educators must determine which conception of play, pedagogy and play pedagogy they adhere to, but rather to empower educators to construct their beliefs and practices with a fuller understanding of what those decisions mean in terms of their theoretical roots and their implications to develop a more meaningful pedagogy of play." We hope it sparks some questions for you.*

All too often the use of the terms “play,” “pedagogy” and “play pedagogy” are used without situating them within a theoretical framework. This can produce somewhat diffuse and disconnected discourses as educators are using the same words with different meanings. By discussing these concepts within three highly influential



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theoretical frameworks – behaviorism, constructivism and cultural-historical theory – educators can more fully understand the diversity of meanings these concepts hold, including what they follow from (their theoretical origins) and what follows from them (their implications).



Teaching and
Learning
Approaches_
Behaviorism,
Cognitivism

06:06 and Social

Each of the following sections briefly explores these concepts within each framework in order to support educators to make more informed, deliberate and intentional choices in how they develop a pedagogy of play. The fundamental purpose of this post is not to argue that educators must determine which conception of play, pedagogy and play pedagogy they adhere to, but rather to empower educators to construct their beliefs and practices with a fuller understanding of what those decisions mean in terms of their theoretical roots and their implications to develop a more meaningful pedagogy of play.

Behaviorism

Framework Introduction & Conception of Pedagogy:

Behaviorism is the study of behavior, viewed as how animals (including humans) respond to stimuli in their environments. A stimuli can be anything in the environment that elicits



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a response. An animal could hear a loud noise, as a stimuli, and run, as a response, for instance. Pedagogically, the basic behaviorist model, explained by Skinner (1976), is stimulus-response-reinforcement. Learning is equated with conditioning students' behavior in accordance with desired outcomes (typically determined by teachers). For example, a stimulus could be an academic task and a teacher can condition students' responses through reinforcements, such as rewards (from star charts to material rewards) to incentivize students to perform optimally. In addition to setting up reinforcement schemes to condition students' behavior, teachers model desired behaviors for students to replicate.

Conception of Play:

A naturalist view of play based in evolutionary psychology would be the one most suited to a behaviorist framework (although not exclusive to it), as it shares the same basic unit of analysis: behavior. Evolutionary psychologists' studies of animal play have found that it naturally occurs amongst all animals (including humans) for the purpose of adapting behavior for survival or success. Burghardt (2010) categorizes play types as physical play, object play and social play. Burghardt defines play as repeated behavior that is incompletely functional, initiated voluntarily, spontaneous, pleasurable, rewarding and reinforcing.

Conception of a Pedagogy of Play:



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The more naturalistic view of play posited by evolutionary scientists can be seen in a pedagogy of play as a means for practicing behaviors, or learning skills, needed for adult life.

Pretend play with a set model to follow, conditioning students' responses with rewards is one type of behaviorist-inspired play pedagogy. An example of this would be a teacher setting up an area in the classroom for students to play house. The teacher models how students should (and shouldn't) behave, perhaps asking them to repeat scripted phrases such as "May I have one?," as the children might ask their parent for a cookie, in order to teach children how to ask for something politely. The cookie then acts as a reward, or reinforcement, when students appropriately re-pond (following the teacher's model) to the stimulus (the teacher's modeled phrase). Another form of behaviorist-inspired play pedagogy is highly directive educational games, often characteristic of tech-driven gamification, in which students engage in repetitive practice (such as times tables problem solving or spelling words) with built-in reinforcement systems (points, level promotion, competitive ranking and other re-wards).

If the student plays an educationally altered version of Pac-Man in which a multiplication problem is set up and there are four houses with four different potential answers to choose from in the game, the Pac-Man needs to go to the house with the right answer to score points while avoiding the ghosts. Once enough points have accumulated the player is rewarded by advancing to another level in the game. In such educational games there is typically one



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answer deemed correct within a closed system of possible moves, all of which follow the conditioning model of stimulus-response-reinforcement.

Discussion:

Advocates of educational gamification argue that it affords students the possibility to learn at their own pace and to cultivate a more positive relationship to failure through a more low-stakes, potentially resilience-building game-based learning. Learning involving memory (such as times tables and spelling) and skill improvement (such as a sport or musical instrument) through repetitive practice seem to be well-suited to a stimulus-response-reinforcement game design. Learning involving reasoning and complex problem-solving, however, may not be well suited to closed-system behaviorist game design that only allow for a few discrete moves that result in success or failure. Generally, there has been criticism of the behaviorist model of stimulus-response-reinforcement and the basic premise of conditioning for its lack of attention to the development of human reason that grapples with the intrinsic meaning of actions, as behaviorism focuses on incentivizing behaviors with rewards to externally motivate children to behave in the way deemed correct or legitimate.

Constructivism

Framework Introduction & Conception of Pedagogy:

Constructivism is a child-centered approach that views individual children



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as discoverers and constructors of their own knowledge through active engagement in the world, in accordance with their biological-cognitive development. A constructivist-inspired belief is that if children are exposed to different situations, they will learn on their own through formulating and testing out their hypotheses, as long as they are developmentally ready to learn what those situations have to offer.

When a child's hypothesis is confirmed the new experience is "assimilated" and when it is not confirmed a child must make "accommodations" to his mental representations, or "schemas", to make sense of it. For example, if a child sees a pictures of a family that is similar to his own family he will assimilate this information. If, however, the child comes across a picture of a family with a different composition, he may need to accommodate this information and learn that there are many types of families. If, however, the child is unable to accommodate the new information, he may not be developmentally ready to learn it. Pedagogically, the role of educators is to prepare the environment for students to learn what they are developmentally ready for by planning activities with opportunities for assimilation and accommodation as children progress through the stages of their development.

Conception of Play:

Constructivist ideas about play build upon the naturalistic basis of evolutionary psychologists, yet specify how play changes as children's cognitive abilities develop through discrete, progressive stages. Piaget



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(1969) argued that children start off as practicing repetitive actions (such as dressing a doll); then advance to more elaborative imaginative play, which he called “symbolic play” due to the use of objects to represent other objects (such as using a stick as a horse); then finally to games with rules (such as board games or sports). A contemporary of Piaget, Parten (1929) built upon his stages, arguing that children’s play progresses from onlooker play to solitary play to parallel play to associative play, and finally, to cooperative play. These progressions from one stage to another occur in accordance with a child’s cognitive development, such that game play follows pretend play, and once a child has progressed through one stage he does not go back to it.

Conception of a Pedagogy of Play:

In a typical constructivist-inspired play-based approach, educators select materials that are age and stage appropriate and plan the pedagogic spaces for children to explore freely, without the interference of teachers or other adults. A pretend play situation may be set up, such as house, with all the materials available to students to play together with little to no teacher intervention. While playing house, students might discover a bit of what it is like to be a little brother in a large family when in reality the student playing that role might be an only child in a small family. The children learn from each other in pretend play, from the diversity of experiences that they bring to the imaginary situations. The role of the teacher in children’s play is



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de-emphasized in this perspective, as it is argued that children develop by investigating their environments in non-directive, free play. Through children's free exploration in play they will have opportunities for assimilation and accommodation as they progress through the stages of their cognitive development.

Discussion:

Piaget's constructivist theoretical framework has revolutionized educators' understanding of how children cognitively develop. The educator's non-interventionalist role of facilitating an environment rich for each individual child's self-directed discovery leaves open the question of how environmental factors limit and afford different possibilities for children's development and choice-making. Fleer (2009) has found that when children are left to only freely explore in play, their conceptual development does not go beyond that of everyday notions. With the support of more experienced play partners, such as educators, however, children can be supported to make connections and relations to more scientific understanding of how the world works.



Pedagogic Play

sarah oatney weiler



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Vygotsky argues that human beings develop through social, historical and cultural activities with other human beings, cultivating a zone of proximal development (*zpd*) in which each one supports the other to do collaboratively what he/she is unable to do yet independently (such as solving a problem together). Vygotsky's theory centers on the mediation of tools in human activities, such as language and the concepts encoded in it. This means that the way that people see and act in the world is filtered through the lens of the concepts they have learned up to that point. As such, the *zpd* can be understood as a meaning making space for teaching and learning concepts collaboratively with others. Vygotsky distinguishes between two dimensions of concepts: the everyday and the scientific. Children typically learn everyday concepts first through their practical, concrete, everyday life experiences, such as seeing people around them use and name things. The everyday conception of "family" develops as a child hears her family members refer to themselves as a family. Scientific concepts develop when a child studies a concept in greater depth and breadth, at school for instance, identifying its defining characteristics in general, theoretical and abstract terms. Scientific concepts, importantly, are systemic in nature, deriving meaning from their relations to other interconnected concepts within a framework that can "penetrate through the external appearance of phenomenon into their essence" (Vygotsky, 1998, 54).



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A more scientific conception of “family” develops when a student studies about what makes a family, including the various members that can constitute it, the roles they take within the family, how they relate to one another and the larger society, etc. With young children this may be through stories and observations. The role of educators is to support students to fuse the everyday concepts, which might be used without much conscious awareness or deliberation upon their meaning, with scientific concepts into what Vygotsky called “real” concepts that can be used with greater intention and agency. By understanding more fully the concept “family” students can make more informed and meaningful decisions about how they relate to their family members or how they view the division of labor (or who does what) within a family.

Conception of Play:

A cultural-historical conceptualization of play as an imaginary situation importantly involving rules, can take the form of pretend play or game play. The rules that constitute the imaginary situation of play mediate the relationship between meaning and action. In play meaning dominates action, such that attention and awareness to meaning is heightened as play participants aim to show the meaning of who they are (their roles), where and when they are (the scenario) and what they are doing and thinking (the props they use and the scripts they create). This meaning is conceptual and is embodied in play participants’ actions according to the rules that they



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believe to govern the concepts literally “at play.” When children play house, for example, they will bring their understanding of the concept “family” from their previous experiences, observations and knowledge from stories to the imaginary situation. When conflicts in their conceptions arise with one another, they negotiate meaning with other playmates, which can often broaden and sometimes deepen their understanding of what the concept “family” means. From the make-up of a family to who does what in the family to what the household rules are to how the family relates to one another can vary widely from child to child, leaving much room for negotiation of meaning and the rules to govern the play situation.

Conception of a Pedagogy of Play:

A cultural-historical pedagogy of play is joint play amongst educators and students, alternating between positions of guiding and following, with the educator supporting students to move beyond the conceptual understandings they bring to the play situation, which are often everyday conceptions, to more scientific ones that empower them to make more informed, intentional decisions in play and in their everyday lives. At times the educator may observe students playing and later question aspects of what happened at play in a moment of reflective discussion with students. At other moments the teacher may take a role while playing together with students, perhaps introducing problems into the play situation. The educators’ key purpose is to support students to make connections between everyday



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concepts and scientific concepts to produce more fully developed, “real” concepts that empower them to make more meaningful decisions in play and in their real lives.

Discussion:

As play pedagogy within a cultural-historical framework is a joint activity amongst educators and students, educators must take care not to “hijack” the play situation by over-directing or over-guiding it, whereby marginalizing children’s voices and running the risk of turning play into an overly academic, or schooled activity. This necessarily involves a pedagogic commitment to joint, shared activity amongst educators and students as co-constructors of knowledge, with the educator supporting students to mediate the relationship between everyday and scientific concepts.

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this link:

<http://www.contemporaryeducation.com/2019/08/what-is-contemporary-education.html>.



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May 4, 2021

Can Teaching and Learning During a Pandemic Be Playful?

Carole Geneix, guest author

Carole Geneix is 6-12 Director of Teaching and Learning at Washington International School (WIS), Faculty member at the Project Zero Classroom and the WIS Summer Institute for Teachers (WISSIT). She is also a Leadership team member of the Making Across the Curriculum project at WIS. She has been using Project Zero ideas for many years as a teacher and school administrator, and has presented Project Zero inspired workshops at national and international conferences.

Fourteen months ago, on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic. [Washington International School](#) (Washington DC) pivoted to distance learning until that summer, started the year in “Distance Learning 2.0,” and opened in a hybrid model in October, 2020. What was lost? Not curriculum. Not social-emotional learning. Not deep thinking. What we lost was play. We could not plan for play. All sports and other extracurricular activities were cancelled, as well as performances, Middle School “minimesters”, trips abroad, evenings of demonstrations of learning. And when we came back, students and colleagues had to social distance at all times and could not share physical resources and supplies. Group work felt almost



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impossible. Yet, I saw small moments of play in classrooms that I would love to share with you, hoping this can continue to inspire you to include “micro-moments of play” in your teaching and learning.

The research done by the Pedagogy of Play project team from Project Zero (at Harvard Graduate School of Education) with the International School of Billund (Denmark) determined that “playful learning” in their community was at the intersection of CHOICE, WONDER and DELIGHT. Each category has descriptors that capture what students do and feel when they have CHOICE, WONDER about something, and experience DELIGHT, together.



While these indicators are culturally and contextually determined, they were helpful to me to understand "micro and mini" examples of playful learning I have seen in WIS classes, meetings and workshops in a year of “teaching and learning during a pandemic”:



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Using emojis and mood boards to discuss topics and emotions (indicators: being



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spontaneous, being silly,
improvising) 😊😊😊

Having debates in a hybrid model, with teams at home interacting with teams in class. Judges attended the session and declared a winner. It felt like play, because after each team's argument students would go back to their breakout rooms or physical group to prepare for a counter-argument. This is a good example of a typical activity that was not affected by Distance Learning or the Hybrid Model. In fact, the "secrecy" of the breakout rooms probably made it more fun for students to "plot" their responses.

Having oral presentations using costumes and props and, for the students at home, filters and backgrounds to "travel" to different places and times.

As an exit ticket, having students draw a concept or key term of the lesson, and having other students guess what the term was (indicators: having and sharing ideas, imagining, focusing attention)



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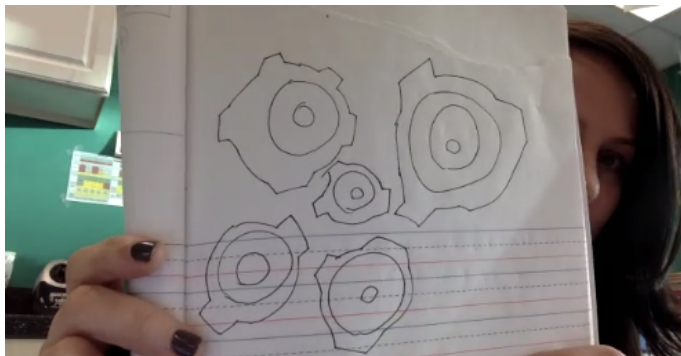
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Using objects to express complex ideas metaphorically (indicators: moving around, expressing excitement, smiling and laughing)



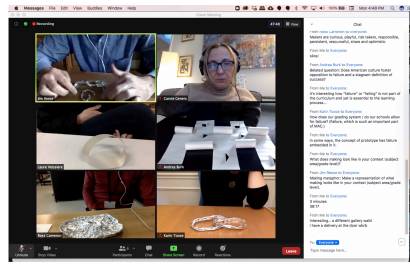
In this workshop, we asked teachers to find an object around them that represented their philosophy of teaching

Making something (big or small) to express your ideas (moving around, having and sharing ideas, creating). The making can happen physically using materials around you or virtually, individually or in a group.

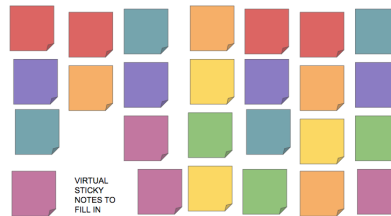


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This “making” can include designing or redesigning a picture using a slide deck where you pre-selected some images and symbols that students can use to make a new image together (thank you [Sheya](#) from Project Zero for the idea!). [Here is an example](#). Feel free to use it!



Please note that the Pedagogy of Play, if somewhat related, is different from the concept of [gamification](#), which is an approach that uses video game design elements to increase student motivation and engagement.

Playful learning can also be very comprehensive and touch upon serious topics. The following 11th grade Language and Literature unit on the Migration Crisis in Europe (taught by Anne Leflot from Washington International School) explored the novel Eldorado by Laurent Gaudé. The goal was to understand the complexity of the





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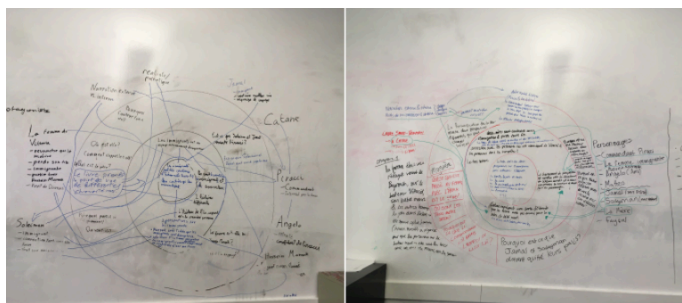
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current migration crisis in the Mediterranean Sea. Students used “thinking routines” such as Parts, People, Interactions from Agency by Design and Peel The Fruit from the Visible Thinking framework to deconstruct the main aspects of the novel and the migration system that the author implicitly denounces. They then created board games that aimed at developing understanding and empathy. Here are a few screenshots of the process:



Using the Routine “Peel the Fruit” from Visible Thinking to unpack the novel’s meaning



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students designing the game





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I hope you will find these indicators of Playful Learning and examples useful to design upcoming lessons that build upon CHOICE, WONDER and DELIGHT!

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May 19, 2021

Thank you Opal School

Ben Mardell

A few years ago I went to an exhibit about [Black Mountain College](#). If, like me, you hadn't heard of the college before, a bit of history. Black Mountain began in 1933 in North Carolina. Organized around John Dewey's principles of education, the college was founded with "the holistic aim to educate a student as a person and a citizen."

Black Mountain was in existence for a little more than 20 years. By all accounts it was a place of innovation and exciting intellectual life. It had a remarkable set of students and faculty—artists, architects, poets, photographers, musicians, and more—including Ruth Asawa, Walter Gropius, Robert Motherwell, Robert Rauschenberg, Susan Weil, John Cage, Buckminster Fuller, Aaron Siskind, Jacob Lawrence, Elaine de Kooning, and Mary Caroline Richards. The college provided inspiration for other alternative higher ed institutions including Evergreen State and Hampshire College. Despite closing in 1957, Black Mountain's legacy has continued into the 21st century.

I found myself thinking of Black Mountain College recently when I heard the news that [Opal School](#), an amazing preschool and K-5 public charter school in Portland, Oregon (USA) would be



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closing at the end of this school year. Opal was founded in 2001 as part of the Portland Children’s Museum. Inspired by the municipal infant toddler centers and preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, Opal’s goals are two-fold: a) to create environments where creativity, curiosity and the wonder of learning thrive for the 125 students who attend the school, and b) to share their learnings with others, which Opal does annually with thousands of educators from around the world, through in-person and online professional development.

Opal has been of particular interest and importance to the Pedagogy of Play (PoP) project. Opal’s pedagogy is guided by the idea of playful inquiry which “invites children to learn and make sense of the things they encounter with curiosity and joy.” The five core PoP teaching practices—empower learners to lead their own learning, build a culture of collaborative learning, promote experimentation and risk-taking, encourage imaginative thinking, and welcome all emotions generated through play—have direct connections to teaching and learning at Opal. Susan MacKay and Matt Karlson were on the advisory board of PoP and continue to provide support to the PoP work.

I first went to Opal as a curious friend, and then as a collaborator on the research project [Inspiring Agents of Change](#). During each visit I was immensely impressed by the children—how they interacted with each other, their teachers, and visitors to their school. I was also impressed by their work—their drawings, writing, and conversations. Take, for example, this



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conversation in a kindergarten/first grade about an activity of looking closely (zooming in), taken from Susan MacKay's new book on story workshop:

Alex: If you don't' zoom in, then you don't really know what something looks like.

Astrid: You might miss something important!

Evelyn: Yeah, and people like to know what things are!

Teo: And people like to learn.

William: They are curious.

Alex: If you never look closely, you might be scared of something when you don't need to be! Just because you don't understand.

Sam: Yeah, and humans just want to understand why. Zooming in helps us understand why.

During my visits I would marvel that young children were having such conversations. My friend Matt Karlsen would call me on this, wondering if I had an impoverished image of what children are capable of. After some reflection, my response was that I wasn't surprised young children could have these conversations. What surprised me was



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that they were having these conversations in school.

Opal is a school that illustrates what is possible. Next to my desk I have a poster from Opal. The top reads: *What happens when a community values the participation of its youngest citizens?* What happens is a school where children learn they have a voice in their community and the world. What happens is a school where children engage in learning not because they have to but because they find it meaningful. What happens is a school where emotions and intellect work together. What happens is a school that promotes democracy.

Opal's closing is a great loss for the children and families in Portland, and for the educational community around the world.

And like Black Mountain College, Opal's twenty years of playful inquiry will have influence far into the future.



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Resources from Opal, such as stories of practice and teaching tools, are still available on the [school's website](#). Susan

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and Matt have started the [Center for Playful Inquiry](#) and are continuing to provide powerful learning experiences for educators. I'll be joining them at Project Zero's upcoming virtual event, [PZ Sparks](#), to facilitate a workshop titled **Welcoming Uncertainty by Supporting Children as Agents of Change**. And the next PoP at Play post will discuss Susan's new book, [Story Workshop: New Possibilities for Young Writers](#)—a very playful approach to literacy in the early childhood and primary years.



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June 3, 2021

Playful writing in the early years: Story Workshop

Ben Mardell

When adults prepare for exchanges supportive of both identity and intellect, children achieve academically because they learn to value the academic as a set of tools useful and necessary to construct and express deeper meaning.

So writes Susan MacKay in her new book Story Workshop: New Possibilities for Young Writers. The academics here involve writing—from the mechanics of grammar and spelling to clarity of expression and voice—all skills we hope children begin to master in elementary school. Written with Kerry Salazar and the Opal School Teacher Researchers, the book offers a vision of how to set the conditions where children embrace learning about writing. It offers a playful way to engage all learners in what is often a painful process for children and teachers alike.

Story Workshop is the perfect mix of theory, pictures of practice, and nuts and bolts advice. Consider some of the chapter titles:

- The case for Story Workshop



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- Preparation
- Provocation: presenting content to be learned
- Invitation and negotiations: setting expectations and inviting children to create
- Story creation
- Story sharing
- Living and learning

Everything you need to know to take this practice on is here.

The book can be used by individual teachers or, better yet, teaching teams who can discuss, try things out, and reflect on the questions Susan offers throughout the book. It should also be of interest to teacher educators and professional developers. The wealth of supporting materials—practical tools and video examples, make this a perfect text for a course on literacy. Teacher candidates can read about and see Story Workshop in action.

Because the videos and examples model excellent teaching, this book is about more than Story Workshop. It is also about setting up an environment that enriches learning, asking generative, open-ended questions, and being a teacher researcher and a reflective practitioner.

Of course, a book about writing should be well written and this one certainly is. Both in how it is written and the commitment to story, the volume reminds me of another of my



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educational heroes, Vivian Paley. All in all, it is a pleasure to read.

With the upcoming closure of Opal School, Susan is now associated with the [Center for Playful Inquiry](#). Information on options for purchasing Story Workshop can be found on the Center's website.

Story Workshop is also about the rights of children and teaching for democracy. Near the end of the volume Susan explains:

Children have the tools they need. But they will sacrifice them all for belonging. They'll give up curiosity if being wrong risks alienation. They'll give up creativity if being right ensures a place in the group. They'll give up imagination if their ideas don't have influence. So the task before us is to create a classroom culture in which no one risks alienation, in which everyone's ideas have influence, and to which everyone believes that they belong.

Susan deeply understands that children come to school as whole people. A pedagogy that treats children as people with feelings, as people who are social, and as people who desire to play is one that will have the most success in helping all children become writers and engaged members of their communities.

PS: Mara Krechevsky and I will be having a conversation with Susan Harris



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MacKay about Story Workshop: New Possibilities for Young Writers on Friday, June 4. We'd love to have you join us! Register [here](#).

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February 25, 2022

Can Higher Ed Classes be Playful? (English version)

Jimena Alviar, Fabián Dulcé, Paula García, Martha Ramirez, & Isabel Tejada-Sánchez

Guest authors

Welcome to this mini-series on playful learning in Higher Education settings! We are a team of 5 Colombian educators - you can read more about each of us at the end of this piece - who took the Let's Play practicum (a Pedagogy of Play online mini-course) in 2021. Each week we will post a piece in English and Spanish on our thinking about playful learning. In this first post, we discuss what playful learning looks like for us by unpacking five playful strategies we implemented.



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One of the most common misconceptions we have encountered in the higher education sector is the belief that playful strategies only apply to



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young learners. We have heard colleagues tell us that “adults don’t enjoy playful strategies,” “learning shouldn’t be fun,” “serious teaching requires a serious (non-playful approach),” and “teachers are not clowns.” Sound familiar? Well, we have learned that having playful classes is highly appreciated by our students, regardless of their age and the subject matter. Their positive responses and feedback are what have kept us creative and willing to give playful learning the place it deserves in our classes. Moreover, research supporting playful learning in the higher education context asserts that it can take place organically (see [Fenger](#) p.58) and yet remain academically sound if we consider playful learning frameworks while designing our education experiences. Some of these frameworks can be: 1) understanding playful learning as a continuum (See [Pyle & Danniels](#)), and 2) knowing that there can be several indicators of playful learning in formal education settings (See [Mardell, Solis & Bray](#)).

To respond to this misconception about playful higher education settings, we made a list of all the activities and elements we have identified as playful in our own practices. Take a look at what we came up with.



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Word Cloud that contains words related to playful learning in our contexts.

For this blog post, we will each share one strategy we have used in our classes. We'll provide the learning objective as well as the context where it took place. We hope you find them useful!

Strategy 1 (Paula): Modeling brains with play dough

Learning objective: To comprehend the brain structures and their related function by creating a 3D representation using Play-doh and other available materials.

Subject: Education programs at the undergraduate and master levels.

Using Play-doh connects us back through tactile perception with our creating and representing skills. First, students review information (videos, audios, images, text) about specific brain structures and functions implicated in the learning process. Then, they work either individually or in pairs to create their own representations of the brain using Play-doh, paper, post its, glue, pencils, coffee stirrers, among other materials.



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Brain modeling using play dough in higher education.

Strategy 2 (Jimena): Using Avatars to foster communication in the classroom!

Learning objective: To get to know classmates and build stronger relationships by asking yes/no questions related to people's physical appearance and personalities.

Subject: Elementary English Class
(Undergraduate English Language Teaching Program)

Using avatars seems to be a very fun way to engage students and motivate them to communicate and play with their partners. To play *Guess Who: Avatars among us* students must send their favorite picture of themselves with their authorization to share it with ONE of their classmates. Then, a partner is assigned to each of the students, whose avatar they will create. Afterwards, students create their classmate's avatar



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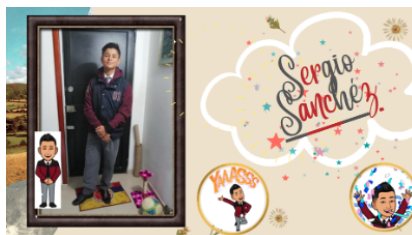
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and a short description of them. Finally, students present their slides and classmates take turns to ask yes/no questions until they discover the avatar's secret identity!



Some of the avatars and descriptions to communicate among teaching students.

Strategy 3 (Fabian): Navigating complex challenges by playing seriously.

Learning Objective: To experiment, as a team, with a real-time confusing, ambiguous, and complex situation to illustrate the fundamentals of agile problem-solving contexts in engineering associated with the Cynefin framework and the Adaptive Leadership model for decision making.

Subject: Innovation, Leadership & Engineering Design (undergraduate elective course)



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An activity used at undergraduate and masters engineering programs in which groups must work (and laugh) together to build a structure out of LEGO bricks. However, everyone has a secret role and a mission which makes the collaborative process more challenging and fun. It emphasizes group communication, conflict, cooperation, leadership dynamics, and problem-solving strategy for iterative and incremental product development.

Undergraduate teamwork while building a structure with LEGO bricks in an engineering course.

Strategy 4 (Martha): Sketchnoting

Learning objective: To synthesize understanding of a teaching approach through sketchnoting.

Subject: Didactics I (Masters program seminar)

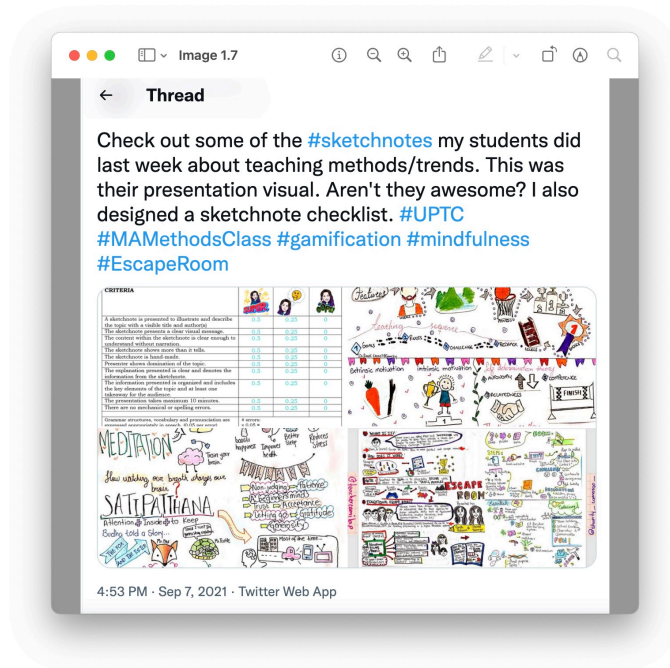
Description: Sketchnoting consists of combining drawings and texts to take visual notes. Students engage with information on a deeper level as they apply visual thinking to synthesize it. Students choose a teaching approach of their preference, research it, sketchnote, and present it. An evaluation checklist with different criteria is provided, including making their sketchnotes self-explanatory. For the creation process, I provide examples of sketchnotes, layout ideas, and simple drawing guides. This is an enjoyable task that takes students out of their



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comfort zone while pushing and challenging them to think differently.



Sketchnoting examples from Master's students in a Didactics class.

Strategy 5 (Isabel): Board Games

Subject: Growth Mindset to Transform Education (Continuing Ed Course)

Learning objective: To review key concepts and relate them with personal experiences.

Board games are popular and straightforward tools to engage students in playful learning. We have used them to foster deeper understanding and application of key concepts as well as to promote students' leadership skills. Martha, Paula, and I, Isabel, co-created an online board game using Genially's templates and called it Mind-o-poly. We decided to use this approach instead of a 'final exam' to help students wrap up their takeaways from the course. We first



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divided the board game into different sections corresponding to the content we covered, creating a variety of prompts that stirred reflections, conceptual revision, and discussions. We also included surprise elements, points, and collectibles. Finally, we gave it a look-and-feel that resembled the course experience.



Board Game: Mind-o-poly

In sum, playful learning can take place in the Higher Ed classroom in multiple ways. In our next series of posts, we will unpack the ways and indicators of playful learning that led us to these ideas. In the meantime, here are some food-for-thought questions for you:

Have you tried any of the previous strategies in your context?

Would you adapt any of these strategies in your playful classroom?

Would you share this blog post with a higher education professor who could be inspired by our experience?



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Stay tuned for our next posts on this mini-series of Higher Ed playful learning!

About the authors:

Jimena Alviar is a proud and passionate English teacher who has devoted more than 10 years to exploring engaging and playful learning scenarios. Her curious and committed teaching spirit has allowed her to apply and navigate different teaching approaches with a varied range of students from preschool to higher education.

Fabián Dulcé is an edupreneur and a highly curious lifelong learner. Passionate about making things different in education; enjoys integrating game and lean-agile thinking to create innovative learning experiences. Since 2013 he's been working in varied educational institutions in Colombia as a trainer, lecturer, researcher and consultant.

Paula García teaches future teachers at the School of Education at Universidad de Los Andes, Colombia. She has devoted her life to learning through a number of approaches, and found playful learning one of the most challenging ways to make sure learning happens and stays.

Martha Ramirez is a teacher educator, academic consultant and researcher specialized in flipped learning and growth mindset. Throughout her teaching career, she has sought ways to teach outside the box: playful learning has been one of the key approaches she uses in every teaching scenario she can.



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Isabel Tejada is a Professor at the School of Education at Los Andes University (Bogotá). She's a passionate and playful life-long learner, growth mindsetter, and intercultural educator.

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March 7, 2022

¿Pueden las clases de educación superior hacerse a través del juego? (Versión en español)

Jimena Alviar, Fabián Dulcé, Paula García, Martha Ramirez, & Isabel Tejada-Sánchez

Autores invitados

¡Te damos la bienvenida a esta miniserie sobre el aprendizaje a través del juego en contextos de educación superior! Somos un equipo de 5 educadores colombianos (puedes leer más sobre cada uno de nosotros al final de este artículo) que tomaron el minicurso en línea Let's Play Practicum en 2021. Cada semana publicaremos un artículo en inglés y en español sobre nuestras experiencias. En esta primera publicación, hablamos sobre qué es el aprendizaje a través del juego para nosotros y



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presentamos cinco estrategias que hemos implementado.

Una concepción errónea común que hemos encontrado a nivel de educación superior es la creencia de que las estrategias basadas en el juego solo aplican a aprendices jóvenes. Hemos escuchado colegas decirnos “Los adultos no disfrutan estrategias basadas en el juego”, “aprender no debería ser divertido”, “la enseñanza sería requiere un abordaje serio (no divertido). ¿Te suena conocido? Bueno, nosotros hemos aprendido que nuestros estudiantes aprecian nuestras clases basadas en el juego sin importar su edad o disciplina de estudio. Las respuestas y retroalimentación positiva que hemos recibido nos mantienen creativos y dispuestos a darle, a las estrategias basadas en el juego, el lugar que se merecen en nuestras clases. Además, la investigación que respalda este enfoque de aprendizaje en el contexto de la educación superior afirma que puede tener lugar de manera orgánica ([ver Fenger](#)) y, aun así, seguir siendo académicamente riguroso si tenemos en cuenta marcos del aprendizaje basado en juego al diseñar nuestras experiencias educativas. Algunos de estos marcos pueden ser: 1) entenderlo como un continuum ([ver Pyle & Danniels](#)), y 2) saber que puede haber varios indicadores de aprendizaje basado en juegos en entornos de educación formal ([ver Mardell, Solis & Bray](#)).





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Para responder a esta concepción errónea sobre las estrategias basadas en juegos en la educación superior, hicimos una lista de todas las actividades y elementos que hemos identificado como lúdicos en nuestras propias prácticas. Echa un vistazo a lo que se nos ocurrió.



Nube formada por palabras relacionadas con el juego y el aprendizaje en nuestros contextos.

Estrategia 1 (Paula): Modelar cerebros con plastilina

Objetivo de aprendizaje: Comprender las funciones de las estructuras cerebrales por medio de la creación de una representación en 3D usando plastilina y otros materiales disponibles.

Asignatura: He usado esta estrategia con adultos de pregrado y posgrado en programas de Educación.

El uso de plastilina nos conecta de nuevo a través de la percepción táctil



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con nuestras habilidades de creación y representación. Primero, pido a los estudiantes que revisen la información (videos, audios, imágenes, textos) sobre estructuras específicas del cerebro involucradas en el proceso de aprendizaje. Luego, les pido que trabajen bien sea individualmente o en parejas para crear sus propias representaciones del cerebro usando plastilina, papel, notas adhesivas, pegamentos, lápices, mezcladores de café, entre otros.



Modelado del cerebro usando plastilina en educación superior.

Estrategia 2 (Jimena): ¡Usando Avatares para fomentar la comunicación en el salón de clases!

Objetivo de aprendizaje: conocer a los compañeros de clase y construir relaciones más sólidas haciendo preguntas de sí/no relacionadas con la apariencia física y la personalidad de las personas.



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Área: Clase de inglés elemental
(Programa de enseñanza del idioma inglés de pregrado)

El uso de avatares es una forma divertida de atraer y motivar a los estudiantes a comunicarse y jugar con sus compañeros. Para jugar “Adivina Quién: Avatares entre nosotros” Pídele a tus estudiantes que manden su foto favorita y pídeles autorización para compartirla con uno de sus compañeros. Luego, asígnale a cada estudiante, un compañero, de quien crearán un avatar. Después, los estudiantes crean los avatares de sus compañeros con una corta descripción. Finalmente, los estudiantes presentan sus diapositivas mientras que los compañeros se turnan para hacer preguntas de si o no hasta que descubren la identidad secreta del avatar!



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Algunos de los avatares y descripciones para comunicarse entre estudiantes de educación.

Estrategia 3 (Fabian): Navegar retos complejos jugando seriamente.

Objetivo de aprendizaje: Ilustrar los fundamentos de resolución ágil de problemas en contextos de ingeniería, experimentando como equipo situaciones complejas, ambiguas y confusas en tiempo real, relacionadas con el marco Cynefin y el modelo de Liderazgo Adaptativo para toma de decisiones.

Asignatura: Innovación, Liderazgo y Diseño en Ingeniería (Curso electivo de pregrado)

Esta es una actividad que uso en cursos de pregrado y maestría en programas de ingeniería. Los grupos trabajan (y ríen) juntos para construir una estructura con legos, pero cada persona tiene un rol y una misión secreta que hace el proceso colaborativo más retador y divertido. La actividad hace énfasis en la comunicación grupal, el conflicto, la cooperación, las dinámicas de liderazgo y estrategias de solución de problemas aplicadas al desarrollo iterativo e incremental de productos.



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Trabajo en equipo mientras construyen una estructura con bloques de Lego en un curso de ingeniería.

Estrategia 4 (Martha): Creación de notas visuales (sketchnoting)

Objetivo de aprendizaje: Sintetizar la comprensión de un enfoque de enseñanza usando notas visuales.

Asignatura: Didáctica I (Seminario de maestría)

Sketchnoting consiste en combinar dibujos y texto para tomar notas de manera visual (sketchnoting). Los estudiantes se involucran con la información de forma más profunda en la medida en que usan pensamiento visual para sintetizarla. Yo pido a mis estudiantes que seleccionen el enfoque de enseñanza que prefieren, investiguen al respecto, hagan su sketchnote y lo presenten. Les doy una lista de chequeo con diferentes criterios, incluyendo uno sobre hacer los sketchnotes autoexplicativos. Para el proceso de creación, les doy a mis estudiantes



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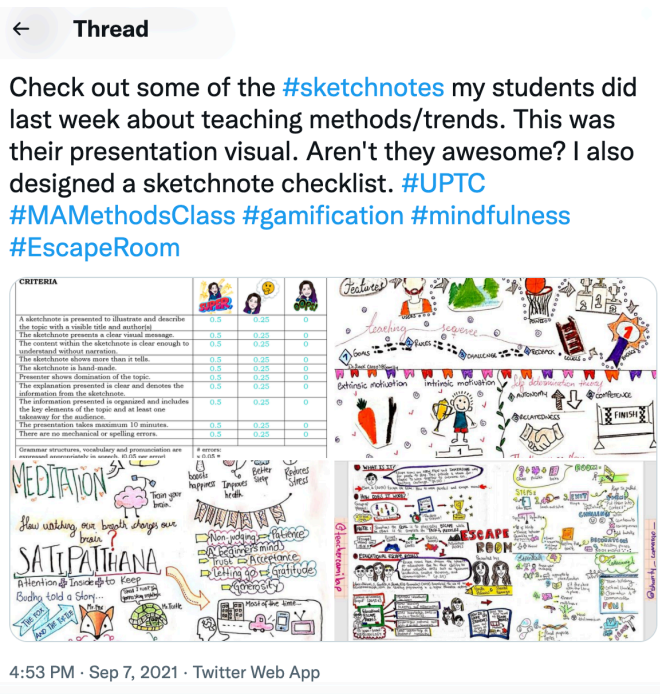
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ejemplos, ideas de diseño y guías para dibujos simples. Esta es una tarea muy agradable que saca a los estudiantes de su zona de confort mientras que los reta a pensar de forma diferente.



Ejemplos de Notas visuales de un grupo de estudiantes de Maestría en la clase de Didáctica.

Estrategia 5 (Isabel): Juegos de mesa

Objetivo de aprendizaje: Repasar conceptos claves y relacionarlos con experiencias personales.

Asignatura: Mentalidad de Crecimiento para transformar la educación (Curso de Educación Continua)

Los juegos de mesa son una herramienta popular y eficaz para enganchar a los estudiantes en estrategias basadas en el juego. Los hemos usado para profundizar en la comprensión y aplicación de conceptos claves, así como para promover las



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habilidades de liderazgo de los estudiantes. Martha, Paula y yo, Isabel, co-creamos un juego de mesa online usando una plantilla de Genially y lo llamamos Mind-o-poly. Decidimos usar un juego de mesa, en lugar de un 'examen final', para ayudar a los estudiantes a revisar sus aprendizajes del curso. Primero, dividimos el juego en secciones correspondientes al contenido que abordamos. Luego, creamos una variedad de enunciados que incitaban a la reflexión, la revisión conceptual y discusiones. Incluimos elementos sorpresa, puntos y coleccionables. Finalmente, le dimos un toque estético propio (look and feel) para evocar la experiencia del curso.



Juego de mesa: Mind-o-poly

En resumen, el aprendizaje basado en juegos puede tener lugar en el aula de educación superior de múltiples maneras. En esta serie de publicaciones desglosaremos las estrategias e indicadores que nos llevaron a estas ideas. Mientras tanto, aquí te dejamos algunas preguntas para reflexionar:

¿Has probado alguna de las estrategias anteriores en tu contexto?



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¿Adaptarías alguna de las estrategias en tu salón de clases?

¿Compartirías este blog con un profe universitario que pudiera inspirarse con nuestra experiencia?

¡No te pierdas nuestras siguientes publicaciones de esta miniserie sobre aprendizaje basado en juegos en la educación superior!

Sobre los autores:

Fabián Dulcé es un edupreneur y un aprendiz de por vida muy curioso. Apasionado por hacer las cosas diferentes en la educación; disfruta integrando el juego y el pensamiento lean-agile para crear experiencias de aprendizaje innovadoras. Desde 2013 ha trabajado en diversas instituciones educativas de Colombia como formador, conferencista, investigador y consultor.

Isabel Tejada es profesora en la Facultad de Educación de la Universidad de Los Andes (Bogotá). Es una educadora intercultural y aprendiz permanente de la vida, apasionada por el aprendizaje a través del juego y la mentalidad de crecimiento.

Paula García enseña a futuros maestros en la Facultad de Educación de la Universidad de Los Andes, Colombia. Ha dedicado su vida al aprendizaje a través de una serie de enfoques y descubrió que el aprendizaje lúdico es una de las formas más desafiantes de



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asegurarse de que el aprendizaje suceda y se mantenga.

Jimena Alviar es una profesora de inglés orgullosa y apasionada que ha dedicado más de 10 años a explorar escenarios de aprendizaje atractivos y divertidos. Su espíritu de enseñanza curioso y comprometido le ha permitido aplicar y navegar diferentes enfoques de enseñanza con una amplia gama de estudiantes desde preescolar hasta educación superior.

Martha Ramírez es formadora de docentes, consultora académica e investigadora especializada en Flipped Learning y mentalidad de crecimiento. A lo largo de su carrera docente, ha buscado formas de enseñar fuera de la caja: el aprendizaje basado en juegos ha sido uno de los enfoques clave que utiliza en todos los escenarios de enseñanza que puede.



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June 30, 2022

Playful Schools Conference - More details!

Last month we shared the dates of the Playful Schools Conference – we now have a few more details to share. This high quality professional learning experience will be held on March 27-29, 2023. Each day, there will be an option to attend one of two different time slots:

9:00-11:00 CET (good for Africa, Europe and Asia), or

16:00-18:00 CET (good for Africa, Europe, South America, and North America)

The conference is free and open to all and is particularly relevant for educators working with children ages 3 through 16. Each day will feature whole group sessions as well as smaller interactive workshops. The conference will be emceed in English and simultaneously translated into Mandarin (for the 9:00 slot) and Spanish (for the 16:00 slot). Most workshops will be conducted in English, though Spanish and Mandarin sessions will also be available.

Titled **Play to change the world: Quality education for all**, the conference aligns with the United Nations Sustainability Goal (SDG) 4 of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all. The conference aims to inspire, connect, and



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embolden practitioners to build a future in which playful learning empowers children to become creative, engaged, lifelong learners.

Day One: More than one way to play features workshops from different cultural contexts, age groups, and disciplines that illustrate practices to support playful learning for children and adults. Because it is often seen as a barrier to playful learning, the topic of assessment is addressed in a roundtable conversation.

On Day Two: Play with a purpose we take a step back from classrooms and schools to highlight the value of play as a strategy for learning. You will hear from artists and designers who use play in their work; you'll encounter research on how play supports learning; and you'll participate in workshops where you get to play and reflect on how this play supports learning.

During Day Three: Play to change the world, we return to classrooms and schools with content focused on target 7 of SDG 4. We explore how playful learning can promote global citizenship, an appreciation of cultural diversity, and sustainable development and lifestyles.

At the end of each day there will be an optional 30-minute *playgroup* to help you reflect on the conference content. If you are coming to the conference on your own, you will have an opportunity to join a playgroup with educators from around the world. If you are coming as part of a group of educators who work together, you can use this time to talk about implications of the conference for



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your context. For all playgroups, we will provide suggestions on how you can organize your time. In the coming months we will share more about these playgroups.

Use the QR code or link below to receive email announcements about the conference:



Scan above or [click here](#) for more information



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July 25, 2022

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Engagement, Challenge, and Feedback as Indicators of Higher Ed Playful Learning

Fabián Dulcé, Isabel Tejada, Paula García, Jimena Alviar, & Martha Ramirez


Several months ago we posted the [first in a series](#) on playful learning in Higher Education. As a reminder, we are a team of 5 Colombian educators who took the Pedagogy of Play, [Let's Play mini-course](#) through Project Zero. We use this space to share our thinking about playful learning. You will find a Spanish version of this post [here](#).

As an essential part of our Let's play practicum training, we were invited to explore different Indicators of Playful Learning around the world (see some examples [here](#) and [here](#)). This turned out to be a mind-blowing task for two reasons: firstly, we realized that indicators, as the combination of theoretical and practical configurations of why and how playful learning can take place, have a significant impact in the way we deliver our teaching practice; secondly, we learned to express and define these indicators through the ways they *looked* and *felt* like in our classes - meaning, how our students experienced them. So this proved to be a very concrete way to



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grasp their power. In fact, having a set of indicators led us to understand that, as educators, we need a framework of reference of our own that helps us appreciate how we conduct our practice, as well as guide our reflections, decision-making processes, and actions in a meaningful and sound way.

Coming up with our indicators

As part of our exploration, we were encouraged to outline a configuration of indicators for our own contexts. Since we all work at Higher Ed settings with diverse characteristics, this was a tricky endeavor, given that most of the examples we explored belonged to primary and secondary school. So we observed our own classes and analyzed all the playful approaches we use in our teaching. This was the basis for the development of the indicators that we now share in this post.

The analysis was divided into 3 moments: first, we had a thorough brainstorming session (individual, then collective) where we poured all the keywords that characterized our practices; second, we mapped out and grouped these terms based on how we interpreted them and what they meant for each of us; and third, we decided one by one on the terms we agreed on, what they looked like and felt like in our settings, whether these really mattered, and if these matched across our scenarios. In this process we used [Marc Brackett's Mood Meter](#) (you can find an editable version in Spanish and English [here](#)) and examples from our classes to narrow down the selection of the key words. Finally, we came up with three



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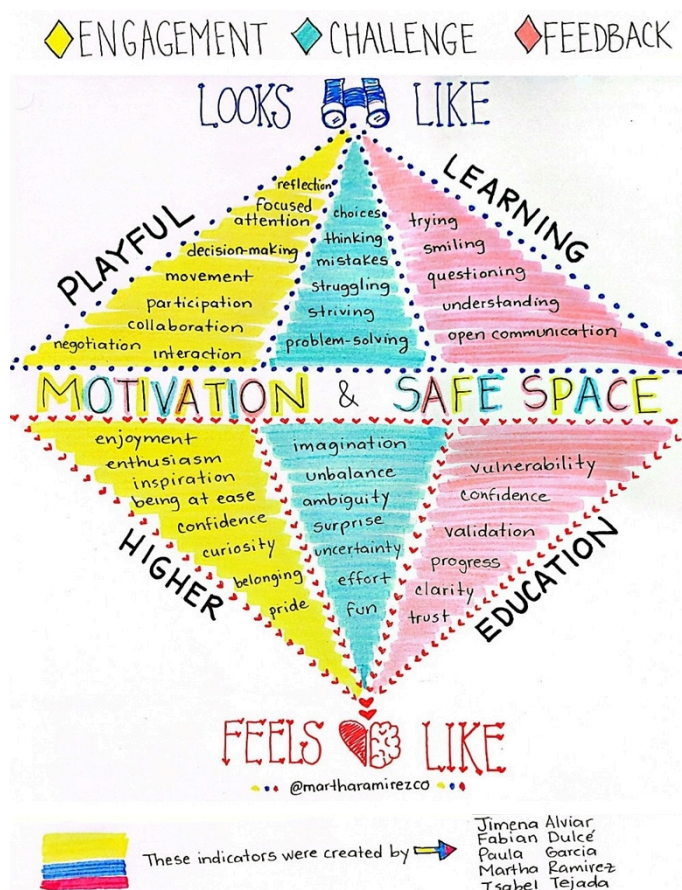
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main indicators for the Higher Ed classes we lead: Engagement, Challenge, and Feedback.

Our indicators

As you can see in the figure below, each of our higher ed playful indicators has words that describe how they *look* and *feel*. Moreover, we found there were two cases of descriptors that were transversal to all three indicators: motivation and safe space. We believe engagement, challenge and feedback in a playful setting should lead to a feeling of *motivation* (feels like) and should be developed within a *safe space* (looks like).



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Engagement is related to “students’ willingness to invest and exert effort in learning, while employing the necessary cognitive, metacognitive, and volitional strategies that promote understanding” (see [Blumenfeld et al.’s work](#)). Thus, from a playful lens, *engagement* is the pivotal tool that unlocks sustained learning, and allows students to put into practice their strategies, make adjustments, and regulate their attention and effort levels while playing/learning in the classroom (see [Dearybury & Jones’s book](#)).

Hence, based on our experience, we can state that *engagement* is the most observable indicator! It provides clear clues on how students are living and navigating the tasks and learning experiences we have designed for them, revealing a path that provides clear *do’s and don’ts* in terms of what boosts or hinders learners’ motivation. Within this line, in higher education, this indicator looks like focused attention and decision making practices inside the classroom. We can also observe movement and active participation, collaboration and interaction among learners, as well as negotiation and reflection of the processes that are being carried out.

On the other hand, students experience engagement with feelings such as curiosity, confidence and being at ease when navigating the tasks we have designed for them, which means they have a sense of openness and trust in a stress-free learning scenario. Additionally, this indicator is experienced by students feeling enthusiasm, enjoyment, pride and



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belonging. These sentiments promote a fun atmosphere that invites them to speak up for themselves and for their partners, and to share their backgrounds and previous knowledge in the quest to accomplish the set learning objectives. Finally, *engagement* might provoke feelings of belonging and connection that allow them to inhabit and share different emotions, and to express them freely within our classroom.

Overall, the *engagement* indicator opens a variety of options to design playful tasks bearing in mind the strategies, feelings, and levels of sustained attention and motivation that we want our students to bring on during tasks. It is one of the keys that opens enjoyable playful scenarios.

Challenge

The Cambridge Dictionary defines *Challenge* as “something that needs great mental or physical effort in order to be done successfully and therefore tests a person’s ability.”

In higher education this definition comes in very handy since most of what we experience in this context is challenging at some level. However, from a playful perspective, this indicator has required us to thoughtfully design activities that first push learners out of their learning comfort zone, and then show them how learning challenges can be resolved playfully. Some ways in which the challenge indicator looks like in the higher education classroom are *thinking* in a purposeful way; *making mistakes* as part of the learning



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process; carefully *solving problems* such as designing and following instructions; *struggling* and *striving* to achieve the learning goals.

Learners may feel *challenge* in playful learning as temporary *unbalance* and *making an effort* that invites them to look for new ways to think of a known issue or to provide answers to unfamiliar situations. This indicator also feels like being uncertain of first trials when attempting to provide an answer. This insecurity can turn into a *surprise* when learners realize that working through the challenge has taken them through a discovery process. Being challenged during the learning process also feels like *fun* for the learning to be playful. Learners might also feel *curious* and *imaginative* while working on challenging activities.

We have learned that the element of challenge in a playful setting connects to student engagement. When this indicator is missing and the task at hand becomes too easy, students disengage and lose interest.

Feedback

Feedback can be defined as “any information about a performance that learners can use to improve their performance or learning. Feedback might come from teachers, peers, or the task itself. ” ([Lipnevich et al., 2013, as cited in Lipnevich and Panadero, 2021](#)). We adhere to this definition as feedback comes from various sources depending on the type of play involved. Moreover, Dearybury and Jones (2020)



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acknowledge *feedback for growth* as an important element in supporting student success within a playful classroom. Thus, the inclusion of feedback as a playful indicator becomes crucial since there must be feedback involved for learning to take place; in other words, playfulness plus feedback leads to learning.

Feedback in higher-ed students' learning journeys includes a sense of *clarity* of a learning outcome to be achieved; *progress* indicators or ceremonies that act as a beacon to stay on track or to make corrections on their learning processes; *validation* mechanisms for self reflection; gained *confidence* regarding their diverse ways to approach a problem while embracing *vulnerability* as a key element that 'lowers the shields' and brings group cohesion and *trust* from their classmates.

You may see students *trying* their best to overcome the creative tension, constantly *questioning* their defaults & defying their comfort zones; *smiling* when they are either struggling or succeeding. Based on these behaviors they develop *open communication* with the teacher and with their peers while *understanding* the value of making (and honoring) mistakes.

The role that feedback plays in any learning scenario encourages students to lower the consequences of failure, take risks, explore, have some fun and try new things. Feedback leads to engagement, thus, to student *motivation*. However we have found that it is the feedback that comes from a



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growth mindset perspective (in how it is given and received) that will allow a *safe space* to exist and where there is no room for judgements or punishments.

Conclusion

To sum up, playful experiences can be enhanced by offering students a set of challenging and engaging situations, having in mind, from the instructional design perspective, what you would like your students to *feel* and what playful learning should *look like* along their learning journeys. Other enhancements include letting them practice and solve these situations iteratively until they have achieved their mastery by using feedback tools and thinking routines in order to reflect collectively or individually and extract the learnings from the experience, so they can apply their gained knowledge in new types of contexts.

We've shared an overview of our playful indicators (**engagement, challenge, feedback**) that can be used as guiding principles for designing innovative classroom experiences aimed to foster a growth mindset and consolidate a flow state in our students' learning journeys. If you would like to dig deeper into our playful indicators please stay tuned for our next posts on this mini-series of Higher Ed playful learning!



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About the authors

Fabián Dulcé is an edupreneur and a highly curious lifelong learner. Passionate about making things different in education; enjoys integrating



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game and lean-agile thinking to create innovative learning experiences. Since 2013 he's been working in varied educational institutions in Colombia as a trainer, lecturer, researcher and consultant.

Isabel Tejada is a Professor at the School of Education at Los Andes University (Bogotá). She's a passionate and playful life-long learner, growth mindsetter, and intercultural educator.

Paula García teaches future teachers at the School of Education at Universidad de Los Andes, Colombia. She has devoted her life to learning through a number of approaches, and found playful learning one of the most challenging ways to make sure learning happens and stays.

Jimena Alviar is a proud and passionate English teacher who has devoted more than 10 years to exploring engaging and playful learning scenarios. Her curious and committed teaching spirit has allowed her to apply and navigate different teaching approaches with a varied range of students from preschool to higher education.

Martha Ramirez is a teacher educator, academic consultant and researcher specialized in flipped learning and growth mindset. Throughout her teaching career, she has sought ways to teach outside the box: playful learning has been one of the key approaches she uses in every teaching scenario she can.



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July 26, 2022

Enganche, desafío y retroalimentación como indicadores de aprendizaje por medio del juego en educación superior

Fabián Dulcé, Isabel Tejada, Paula García, Jimena Alviar, & Martha Ramirez

Algunos meses atrás publicamos [la primera parte de una serie](#) de posts sobre juego en educación superior. Les recordamos que somos 5 educadores colombianos que tomamos [el mini curso de Pedagogía del juego](#) por medio de Proyecto Zero. Estamos usando este espacio para compartir nuestras ideas sobre el aprendizaje a través del juego. Van a encontrar una versión en anglais este post [aquí](#).

Como parte esencial de nuestro curso ["Let's Play Practicum"](#), se nos invitó a explorar las experiencias de desarrollo de indicadores de aprendizaje a través del juego en otras partes del mundo (consulta algunos ejemplos [aquí](#) y [aquí](#)). Esto resultó ser una tarea alucinante por dos razones: en primer lugar, nos dimos cuenta de que los indicadores, entendidos como la combinación de configuraciones teóricas y prácticas sobre el por qué y el cómo se puede aprender a través del juego, tienen un



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impacto significativo en cómo impartimos nuestra práctica docente; y en segundo lugar, aprendimos a expresar y definir estos indicadores a través de la forma en que estos se *veían* y se *sentían* en nuestras clases; es decir, cómo los experimentan nuestros estudiantes. Este ejercicio demostró ser una manera muy concreta de valorar el poder del aprendizaje basado en el juego. De hecho, al contar con un conjunto de indicadores entendimos que, como educadores, necesitamos un marco de trabajo propio que nos sirva de referencia y nos ayude a reconocer cómo llevamos a cabo nuestra práctica de enseñanza, así como a orientar nuestras reflexiones, procesos de toma de decisiones y acciones en el aula, de una forma significativa y rigurosa.

El desarrollo nuestros indicadores

Como parte de nuestra exploración, se nos animó a bosquejar una configuración de indicadores para nuestros propios contextos. Dado que todos trabajamos en entornos de educación superior con características diversas, este fue un reto, ya que la mayoría de los ejemplos que estudiamos provenían de la escuela primaria y secundaria. Así que decidimos observar nuestras propias clases y analizamos todas las aproximaciones y aplicaciones lúdicas que usamos en nuestra enseñanza. Esta fue la base para el desarrollo de los indicadores que compartimos en esta publicación.



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El análisis se dividió en 3 momentos: primero, tuvimos una sesión de lluvia de ideas (individual, luego colectiva) donde



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incluimos todas las palabras clave que caracterizan nuestras prácticas docentes; segundo, mapeamos y agrupamos estos términos según cómo los interpretamos y qué significaban para cada uno de nosotros; y tercero, acordamos uno por uno los términos en los que coincidimos, cómo se veían y se sentían en nuestros contextos, si estos realmente importaban y si coincidían en nuestros escenarios de enseñanza-aprendizaje. En este proceso utilizamos el [Mood Meter de Marc Brackett](#) (puedes encontrar una versión editable en español e inglés [aquí](#)) y ejemplos de nuestras clases para acotar la selección de las palabras clave. Finalmente, llegamos a tres indicadores principales para las clases de educación superior que dirigimos: **Enganche, Desafío y Retroalimentación**.

Nuestros indicadores

Como se puede ver en la figura de abajo, cada uno de nuestros indicadores de aprendizaje a través del juego para educación superior tiene palabras que describen cómo se *ven* y cómo se *sienten* en las experiencias de aprendizaje. Además, encontramos que había dos descriptores que eran transversales a los tres indicadores: *motivación* y *espacio seguro*. Creemos que el enganche, el desafío y la retroalimentación en un espacio de aprendizaje basado en el juego deben conducir a un sentimiento de motivación (lo que se *siente*) y deben desarrollarse dentro de un espacio seguro (lo que se *ve*).



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Enganche

El enganche está relacionado con “la disposición de los estudiantes de invertir y esforzarse en el aprendizaje, mediante el uso de estrategias cognitivas, metacognitivas y volitivas necesarias que promuevan la comprensión” ([ver el trabajo de Blumenfeld et al.](#)). Por tanto, desde una perspectiva lúdica, el *enganche* es la herramienta fundamental que desbloquea el aprendizaje sostenido y permite a los estudiantes poner en práctica sus estrategias, hacer ajustes y regular sus niveles de atención y esfuerzo mientras juegan/aprenden en el aula ([ver el libro de Dearybury & Jones](#)).

Por lo tanto, basados en nuestra experiencia, ¡podemos afirmar que el *enganche* es el indicador más observable! Brinda pistas claras sobre



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cómo los estudiantes están viviendo y navegando las actividades y experiencias de aprendizaje que hemos diseñado para ellos, revelando una ruta que proporciona orientación clara acerca de *qué hacer* y *qué no hacer* en términos de lo que potencia o impide la motivación de los estudiantes. En ese sentido, en educación superior, este indicador se ve como *atención focalizada* y prácticas que incluyen la *toma de decisiones* dentro del aula. También podemos observar *movimiento* y *participación* activa, *colaboración* e *interacción* entre pares, así como *negociación* y *reflexión* sobre los procesos que se están llevando a cabo.

Por otro lado, los estudiantes experimentan enganche cuando sienten *curiosidad*, *seguridad*, y se sienten a gusto al navegar por las actividades que hemos diseñado para ellos, lo cual significa que tienen una sensación de apertura y confianza en un espacio de aprendizaje libre de estrés.

Adicionalmente, este indicador es experimentado por estudiantes que sienten *entusiasmo*, *disfrute*, *orgullo* y *pertenencia*. Estos sentimientos promueven un ambiente entretenido que los invita a hablar por sí mismos y por sus compañeros y a compartir sus perspectivas y conocimientos previos en la búsqueda del logro de los objetivos de aprendizaje establecidos. Finalmente, el *enganche* puede provocar sentimientos de *pertenencia* y conexión que les permiten compartir diferentes emociones, y expresarlas libremente dentro de nuestra clase.



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En general, el indicador de *enganche* abre una variedad de opciones para



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diseñar tareas lúdicas teniendo en cuenta las estrategias, sentimientos y niveles de atención sostenida y motivación que queremos que nuestros estudiantes experimenten en sus actividades. Esta es una de las llaves que abre escenarios basados en el juego agradables y significativos.

Desafío

El Diccionario de Cambridge define *Desafío* como “algo que requiere un gran esfuerzo mental o físico para poder realizarse con éxito y por lo tanto pone a prueba la capacidad de una persona.”

En educación superior, esta definición resulta muy útil ya que la mayoría de lo que experimentamos en este contexto es desafiante de algún modo. Sin embargo, desde una perspectiva lúdica, este indicador ha requerido que diseñemos cuidadosamente actividades que primero saquen a los estudiantes de su zona de confort de aprendizaje y, en segundo lugar, que les muestren cómo se pueden resolver los desafíos de aprendizaje de una manera lúdica. Algunas formas en las que se ve el indicador de desafío en aulas de educación superior son *pensar* con un propósito; *equivocarse* como parte del proceso de aprendizaje; *solucionar problemas* cuidadosamente, así como diseñar y seguir instrucciones; *luchando* y *empeñándose* por lograr los objetivos de aprendizaje.

Los estudiantes pueden sentir el *desafío* en el aprendizaje por medio del juego como un *desequilibrio* temporal y un *esfuerzo* que los invita a buscar nuevas



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formas de analizar un tema conocido o proporcionar respuestas a situaciones desconocidas con elementos de *ambigüedad*. Este indicador también se puede sentir como *incertidumbre* en relación con las primeras iteraciones cuando se intenta llegar a una respuesta. Esta inseguridad puede convertirse en *sorpresa* cuando los estudiantes se dan cuenta que superar el desafío los llevó a realizar un proceso de descubrimiento. Ser desafiado durante el proceso de aprendizaje lúdico también implica *diversión*. Los estudiantes también pueden sentir curiosidad e *imaginación* mientras trabajan en actividades desafiantes.

Hemos aprendido que el desafío en un ambiente lúdico se conecta con el enganche de los estudiantes. Cuando este indicador no existe y la actividad en cuestión se vuelve demasiado fácil, los estudiantes se desconectan y pierden interés.

Retroalimentación

La retroalimentación se puede definir como “cualquier información sobre un desempeño, que los estudiantes pueden usar para mejorar su desempeño o aprendizaje. La retroalimentación puede provenir de maestros, compañeros, o de la actividad misma”. ([Lipnevich et al., 2013, citado en Lipnevich y Panadero, 2021](#)). Nos adherimos a esta definición, ya que la retroalimentación proviene de varias fuentes dependiendo del tipo de juego involucrado. Además, Dearybury y Jones (2020) reconocen la *retroalimentación para el crecimiento* como un elemento importante para apoyar el éxito de los estudiantes dentro



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de un aula lúdica. Así, la incorporación de la retroalimentación como indicador de aprendizaje a través del juego se vuelve crucial dado que debe haber retroalimentación para que ocurra el aprendizaje; en otras palabras, el juego más la retroalimentación lleva al aprendizaje.

La retroalimentación en los recorridos de aprendizaje de los estudiantes de educación superior incluye una sensación de *claridad* de un resultado de aprendizaje a lograr; indicadores de *progreso* o ceremonias de seguimiento para validar el aseguramiento del aprendizaje; mecanismos de *validación* para la autorreflexión; adquirir *confianza* con respecto a las diversas maneras de abordar un problema, al tiempo que aceptan la *vulnerabilidad* como un elemento clave que "baja los escudos" y brinda cohesión al grupo y *confianza* de sus compañeros de clase.

Se puede ver a los estudiantes *intentando* todo lo posible para superar la tensión creativa, *cuestionando* constantemente lo establecido y desafiando sus zonas de confort; *sonriendo* cuando están o bien luchando o bien teniendo éxito. Con base en estos comportamientos, desarrollan una *comunicación abierta* con el maestro y con sus pares a la vez que *comprenden* el valor de cometer (y honrar) los errores.

El papel que juega la retroalimentación en cualquier espacio de aprendizaje alienta a los estudiantes a disminuir las consecuencias de la falla, y, por ende, a tomar riesgos, a explorar, a divertirse y probar cosas nuevas. La



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retroalimentación conduce al compromiso, y, por tanto, a la *motivación* de los estudiantes. Sin embargo, hemos encontrado que la retroalimentación proveniente desde una perspectiva de mentalidad de crecimiento (en cómo se da y se recibe) es la que permitirá que exista un *espacio seguro* y que no haya lugar para juicios o castigos.

Conclusión

En resumen, las experiencias de aprendizaje se pueden mejorar al ofrecer a los estudiantes un conjunto de situaciones desafiantes y atractivas, teniendo en cuenta, desde la perspectiva del diseño instruccional, lo que le gustaría *que sientan* sus estudiantes y *cómo debería verse* el aprendizaje a través del juego a lo largo de sus recorridos de aprendizaje. Otras mejoras incluyen permitir que practiquen y resuelvan estas situaciones de forma iterativa hasta que hayan logrado su dominio mediante el uso de herramientas de retroalimentación y rutinas de pensamiento para la reflexión colectiva o individual y, de esta manera, extraer los aprendizajes de la experiencia para que puedan aplicar su conocimiento adquirido en nuevos tipos de contextos.

Hemos compartido una descripción general de nuestros indicadores de aprendizaje lúdico (enganche, desafío, retroalimentación) que se pueden usar como principios guía para diseñar experiencias innovadoras en el aula encaminadas a fomentar una mentalidad de crecimiento y consolidar



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un estado de flujo en los recorridos de aprendizaje de nuestros estudiantes.

¡Si deseas profundizar en cada uno de nuestros indicadores lúdicos, permanece atento a nuestras próximas publicaciones de esta miniserie sobre aprendizaje a través del juego en contextos de educación superior!

Sobre los autores:

Fabián Dulcé es un edupreneur y un aprendiz permanente muy curioso. Apasionado por hacer las cosas diferentes en la educación; disfruta integrando el juego y el pensamiento lean-agile para crear experiencias de aprendizaje innovadoras. Desde 2013 ha trabajado en diversas instituciones educativas de Colombia como formador, conferencista, investigador y consultor.

Isabel Tejada es profesora en la Facultad de Educación de la Universidad de Los Andes (Bogotá). Es una educadora intercultural y aprendiz permanente de la vida, apasionada por el aprendizaje a través del juego y la mentalidad de crecimiento.

Paula García enseña a futuros maestros en la Facultad de Educación de la Universidad de Los Andes, Colombia. Ha dedicado su vida al aprendizaje a través de una serie de enfoques y descubrió que el aprendizaje lúdico es una de las formas más desafiantes de asegurarse de que el aprendizaje suceda y se mantenga.

Jimena Alviar es una profesora de inglés orgullosa y apasionada que ha



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dedicado más de 10 años a explorar escenarios de aprendizaje atractivos y divertidos. Su espíritu de enseñanza curioso y comprometido le ha permitido aplicar y navegar diferentes enfoques de enseñanza con una amplia gama de estudiantes desde preescolar hasta educación superior.

Martha Ramírez es formadora de docentes, consultora académica e investigadora especializada en Flipped Learning y mentalidad de crecimiento. A lo largo de su carrera docente, ha buscado formas de enseñar fuera de la caja: el aprendizaje basado en juegos ha sido uno de los enfoques clave que utiliza en todos los escenarios de enseñanza que puede.



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September 10, 2022

Pedagogy of Play Teacher Education Resources

Megina Baker

Have you heard the saying “teachers teach the way they were taught”? Our Pedagogy of Play team has found, over the course of our [research in four countries](#) around the globe, that playful learning begins with playful teaching. Yet many teachers didn’t experience playful learning as children themselves, and need opportunities to shift their thinking about teaching practices in order to foster playful learning for the students in their classrooms. That’s why my colleague Ben Mardell and I have spent the past few years developing a set of Pedagogy of Play Teacher Education Resources, designed to be used by teacher educators as they prepare pre-service teachers at teaching colleges and universities. In this post we’ll share how the resources were developed, what they include, and how you can find and access them - for free!

How were the Resources developed?

When we started this project, I was teaching full-time in the teacher education program at Boston University. I had the great pleasure of teaching a course on learning through play to undergraduate and graduate students. In that course, we piloted materials for the PoP Teacher Education Resources,



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starting with the findings from our research, as well as research on play and playful learning we have reviewed and built upon over the course of the PoP project. We built a draft of a 14-week course, designed around three core questions:

Why do we need a pedagogy of play?

What does learning through play look like and feel like in different cultural contexts?

How can we promote a pedagogy of play?

Over the next two years, Ben and I worked in collaboration with a global network of amazing teacher educators to test, iterate, and adapt the course materials. Meeting regularly via Zoom, we were able to bring together over 30 teacher educators from more than 12 countries (click on the pins in the link above to learn more about our collaborators).

Pedagogy of Play Teacher Education Resources Collaborators

Thank you to all of the amazing playful teacher educators who collaborated in the creation of these PoP TER Resources

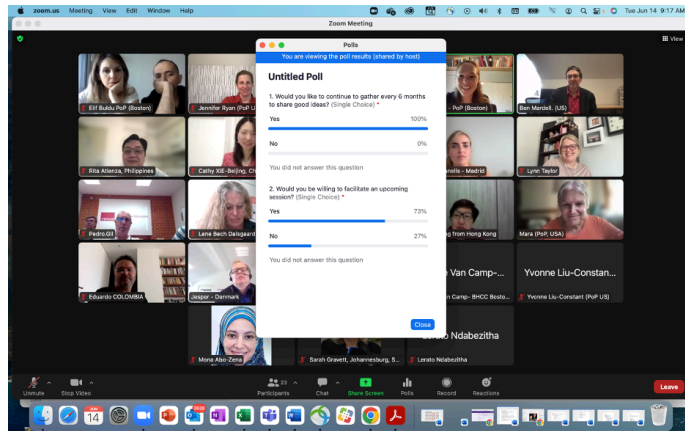


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The variety of the contexts and cultures in which we all teach enriched the Resources, and created a network of playful teacher educators that will continue to meet regularly to share ideas and experiences as we prepare the next generation of playful classroom teachers. Here are a few snapshots from our most recent gathering:



What do the Teacher Education Resources include?

All of the teacher education resources are available for free [at this link](#). When you visit that website here's what you'll see:





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Pedagogy of Play Teacher Education Resources

Introduction

Welcome to the Pedagogy of Play (PoP) teacher education resource webpage. Here you will find materials for a 14-session course to introduce pre-service teacher candidates playful learning. Materials on this page include:

The materials were created with the support, collaboration, and feedback from over 30 teacher educators from around the globe. Feel free to adapt and hack the materials as you see fit, using all or some of the course sessions. The materials can also be adapted to use with in-service educators to promote their professional learning.



The resources include:

An instructor guide with detailed information about each course session

A course syllabus that can be shared with teacher candidates

PowerPoint slides for each course session

Activity Cards and Assignments that supplement information in the instructor guide

Suggested readings

A library of classroom videos from a range of age groups and geographies that can promote discussions of playful learning

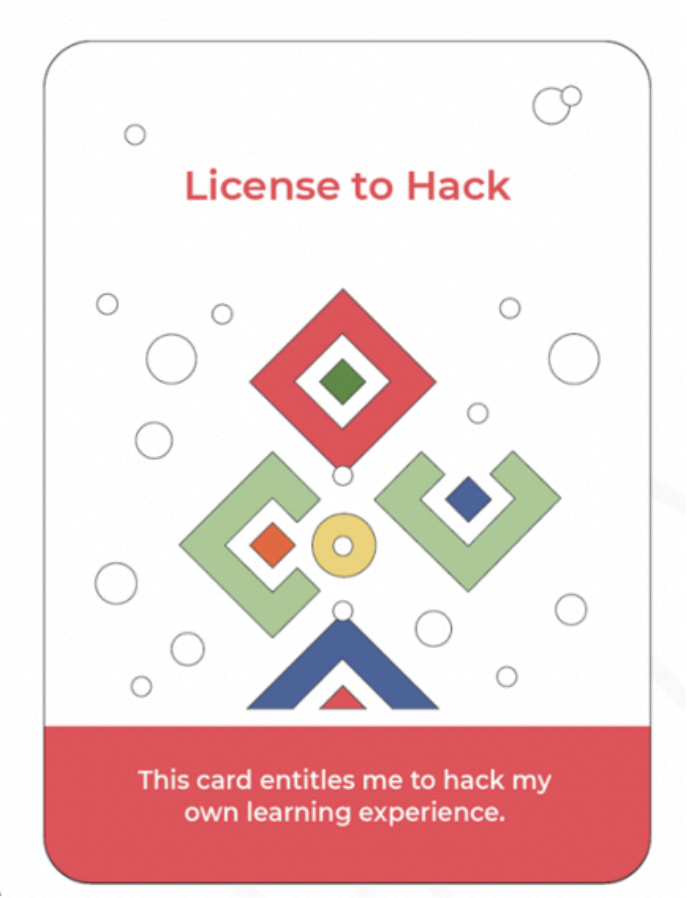
If you're a teacher educator, coach, or someone who leads teacher professional learning, we hope you will explore, adapt, and hack the materials





as you see fit, using all or some of the course sessions. The materials are designed primarily with pre-service teachers in mind, but can also be adapted to use with in-service educators to promote their professional learning.

As we wrote in the Instructor Guide, take this “License to Hack” card – use it well as you explore and hack the Teacher Education Resources, making them your own and using them to promote playful teaching, and playful learning, wherever you are.





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October 14, 2022

Inclusive playgrounds, playful politics, and trust: A conversation with Audrey Tang

Ben Mardell

Recently, PoP researchers Ben Mardell and Yvonne Liu-Constant met with Audrey Tang in her office in Taipei. An internationally renowned open-source coder and activist, Audrey is also Taiwan's Digital Affairs Minister.

Minister Tang has a fascinating biography. She grew up in Taiwan, was child of two journalists, and dropped out of school at 14. By 19 she was an entrepreneur in Silicon Valley. In her early thirties she retired from business to devote herself to public service.


We wanted to meet with the Minister because she is a quintessential playful learner and “*what if*” thinker (listen to this [2020 National Public Radio interview](#) to get a sense of why we say this). When advocating for schools that cultivate playful learning and “*what if*” thinking, it is useful to have examples of adults who play with ideas for the betterment of their local and global communities. Audrey Tang is such an example.

During our half hour together, Ms. Tang touched on a wide range of big ideas:



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democracy as a social technology, intrinsic motivation and the problem with grades, education reform in Taiwan, and more. Here we highlight three evocative ideas discussed: inclusive playgrounds, playful politics, and trust.

Inclusive Playgrounds

We began our conversation by asking the Minister, “How do you go about identifying a problem and then solving it?” Her answer was swift and clear:

I don't solve problems. I live with problems. I spend time with problems. The idea is simple. It's about empowering people closest to the pain.

Ms. Tang then shared an example of this from the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. In Taiwan at that time, pharmacists were experiencing a lot of pain. With the goal of getting masks to at least 75% of the population to prevent the spread of the disease, pharmacies had long lines at their doors, stressed customers, and, when supplies of masks ran out, an upset public. Tang talked to the pharmacists, asking, *What if you were a webmaster, what would you do?* [not an unreasonable question coming from an expert coder and webmaster]. One result of these conversations was a **mask map**, an accessible online tool that listed the availability of masks and wait times at different pharmacies. A feature of the map was that pharmacists were provided a “cloak of invisibility”— a button they could press when they ran out of masks, allowing them to



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disappear off the map until they restocked.

Describing her approach, Audrey explained:

My commitment is to make a space—an inclusive playground—where there can be better ideas.

We see this inclusive playground as a space where people can together imagine, try things out, iterate, and ask “*what if.*” Having such a playground can help account for Taiwan’s internationally recognized success against the virus.

Playful Politics

Minster Tang helped fashion the three pillars of Taiwan’s response to Covid: fast, fair, and fun. Fun!? Having experienced Covid in the US, fun feels very far from the response presented by our own government (and likely other places as well). Ms. Tang explained why fun:

Optimizing for fun is very important in politics. Why? Because if it isn’t fun, people don’t share innovations with others.

It is critical that citizens share innovations and accurate information with each other. Audrey continued,

You have to have a higher R [replication] value than conspiracy theories...If our R value is even higher--more fun--



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it gives us a mental vaccine; an inoculation of the mind...When someone is in a playful mood, there is no room for conspiracy theories.

An example of fun is the Covid prevention Spokesdog, CEO Shiba (總柴). The cuddly pup went viral on Taiwanese social media, helping spread humor over rumor.



An English version of one of the many social media posts from the Health and Welfare Ministry of Taiwan featuring CEO Shiba.

This idea of fun and laughter in the face of serious threats reminds me and Yvonne of Professor Lupin from the Harry Potter series. Lupin taught his students to laugh at monsters (in the form of “bogarts”) in order to make them disappear. It also reminds us of a concept Project Zero Director Daniel Wilson brought to our attention: playful politics. Politics, seen as a group of people collectively deciding how to



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organize themselves, is a complex endeavor. It isn't, and can't, always be fun. But regardless of how one describes it (with reference to R values or playful politics), it is clear the world needs ways to have (and spread) good ideas and inoculations against conspiracy theories. More fun doesn't seem like a bad idea.

Trust

At the end of our conversation, we asked the Minister to spend time with a problem endemic to the US educational system (and likely other countries as well): a lack of trust. In the US, federal educational policy makers often don't trust their state counterparts. State department of education officials don't trust local districts heads. District administrators don't trust school leaders, who in turn don't trust their teachers. And it can seem like no one trusts the kids...trusting them to engage in learning without the threat of punishment. Which seems absurd, as we've never met a child who doesn't want to learn—how to read, learn math, or explore the world.

Ms. Tang's response was again swift and clear:

To give no trust is to get no trust.

Taking the issue beyond the specific case of education in the US, she argued,

It's paramount that we start trusting strangers.



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This advice is born out of experience. When Audrey was 14, having just dropped out of school, she began emailing scholars around the world about their research. Not knowing the message came from a teenager, they responded with thoughtful answers. She has fond memories of how these strangers responded with respect.

She provided an example from education in Taiwan that operationalizes this view of trust. In rural areas with less social privilege, educators are connecting young people with experts in fields in which they are interested. To communicate with these experts, the teenagers are getting tablets. Audrey explained,

We trust the children to use the tablet well. And because we trust the children, the children may trust us back. The goal of the program is to make children the hosts of their own learning.

A very similar notion to the PoP idea that playful learning involves children leading their own learning!

The idea of schools as inclusive playgrounds, where children and young people play with ideas, individually and collectively asking *what if...* in educational systems without trust, this is a goal that feels far out of reach. Yet talking to Audrey Tang fills one with hope. Quoting John Lennon, as she did in our conversations, Audrey would say, *"It's easy if you try."*



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Minister Tang with Ben
and Yvonne and
colleagues from the
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December 22, 2022

2023: Your Year for Playful Learning

Megan Siwek



No New Years' Resolution yet? Do not worry—we have you covered!

This New Year, we invite you to join us on our journey to build a future in which playful learning empowers children to become creative, engaged, lifelong learners!

We know—this may exceed the bounds of traditional resolutions and seem a bit ambitious. That's why we have curated a simple step you could take toward this goal: [sign up](#) for the [Playful Schools Conference](#)! Join us **March 27-29, 2023**, to learn from and with playful practitioners worldwide.

We know—a three-day conference hosted in Billund, Denmark, is not exactly what you would consider a simple commitment. However, the conference is **free, virtual**, and has **two different time slots**, 9:00-11:00 CET or 16:00-18:00 CET, for global accessibility. It is also emceed in English, and simultaneously translated into Mandarin



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if you join the 9:00 CET time slot and Spanish if you join the 16:00 CET slot.

We know—you may have other obligations during these hours and cannot commit to the entire block of time. That is why we are working on releasing a complete conference program in January, so you can choose the sessions that best fit you and your journey.

We also have the perfect opportunity for folks already incorporating playful learning and looking to take a more significant leap this year. We are currently running an open call for “lightning” presentations that showcase inspiring examples of educators facilitating learning through play experiences in schools. If this interests you, we are excited to share [more information here](#). Please note the first step to being considered for the program is due by January 25, 2023!

If you are still unsure, we have a few more details that might convince you! Titled, **Play to change the world: Quality education for all**, the conference aligns with the United Nations Sustainability Goal (SDG) 4 of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all. The conference aims to inspire, empower and connect practitioners. It is hosted by The LEGO Foundation, Harvard Project Zero and International School of Billund. Here are some additional highlights:



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Day One: More than one way to play features workshops from different cultural contexts, age groups, and disciplines that



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illustrate practices to support playful learning for children and adults. Because it is often seen as a barrier to playful learning, the topic of assessment is addressed in a roundtable conversation.

Day Two: Play with a purpose invites us to take a step back from classrooms and schools to highlight the value of play as a strategy for learning. You will hear from artists and designers who use play in their work; you'll encounter research on how play supports learning; and you'll participate in workshops where you get to play and reflect on how this play supports learning.

During Day Three: Play to change the world, we return to classrooms and schools with content focused on target 7 of SDG 4. We explore how playful learning can promote global citizenship, an appreciation of cultural diversity, and sustainable development and lifestyles.

At the end of each day there will be an optional 30-minute reflection group to help you consider the conference content. If you are coming to the conference on your own, you will have an opportunity to join a reflection group with educators from around the world. If you are coming as part of a group of educators who work together, you can



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use this time to talk about implications of the conference for your context. For all reflection groups, we will provide suggestions on how you can organize your time. In the coming months we will share more about these groups.

If you have any questions about the Playful Schools Conference, or if you are in need of support, please reach out to playfulschools@lego.com.



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March 14, 2023

Playful Learning in Alabama

Ben Mardell

In the fall, I was in Mobile, Alabama for the State Department of Education's annual MEGA Conference. Pedagogy of Play fellow Dr. Melissa Scarpate and I were invited to present by the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) which is taking a playful approach to literacy instruction. I want to share a few impressions of my visit.

Alabama educators are actively navigating the paradoxes between play and school. While play supports learning, there are paradoxes between play and school that can make it difficult for playful learning to thrive. For example, in play, children are in charge whereas in school, educators have important learning goals for our students.

Rather than seeing this paradox as an "either/or," teachers at the Chickasaw Elementary School are turning the situation into a "yes/and." I sat in on an ARI summer reading camp for rising first graders. The children had been identified as needing additional support, and the teachers had specific literacy goals for them. These goals were being met by providing meaningful, engaging activities. I saw a group of happy children taking part in rich conversations, involved in dramatic play, and eagerly reading along with their



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teacher to develop their vocabulary, sense of story, concepts of print, and phonemic awareness.



Chickasaw Elementary students create animal habitats as part of their animal investigations. Photo courtesy Melissa Scarpate.

Educators are using playful learning to address trauma. Coaches from the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education crisscross the state to help teachers in supporting children who are experiencing trauma. The coaches know that promoting children’s emotional and social development (closely linked to their intellectual development) involves more than what is typically called “behavioral management”; that play has a central role in children’s development.

Playful learning is percolating up in Alabama. For sixteen consecutive years, Alabama’s state funded pre-k program has ranked highly in the National Institute for Early Education Research’s State of Preschool Yearbook. For good reason, the state makes a big commitment of treasure and talent to supporting early education. The whole child, playful approach in preschool is percolating up to kindergarten and primary school through a program titled





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“The Alabama Pre-K-3rd Grade Integrated Approach to Early Learning.” The P-3 program, as it is called, is a three-pronged effort that supports school leadership, instruction, and assessment that began in 2017 and is showing strong outcomes.

The program has a wonderful origin story. After receiving a First Class Pre-K, Kindergarten teachers at Zion Chapel reported that children were coming better prepared for learning. These kindergarten teachers began asking if they could be a part of what the teachers in the First Class Pre-K were doing. Discussions soon began with the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (ADECE). With seed money from the Kellogg Foundation, a partnership between the ADECE and the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) developed to create an integrated approach to early learning - commonly referred to as P3 - funding a pilot of 35 classrooms.

[Evaluation results](#) from the pilot showed positive effects for the children and teachers. Children showed higher percentages of Meets/Exceeds levels for academic skills. Teachers and families reported an increase in children's problem solving skills, communication, and behavioral/socio-emotional regulation. They also reported a decrease in challenging behaviors. Professional development (i.e., coaching) is part of the program for the teachers and school leaders, and both groups note growth in their skills. Additionally, teachers reported a higher job satisfaction, the result of the joy that



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comes from watching students who are engaged in learning.

These outcomes resulted in secured funding for and continuation of the P3 program, with the Alabama Pre-K to 3rd Grade Integrated Approach to Early Learning becoming part of Governor Kay Ivey's Strong Start Strong Finish (SSSF) Initiative. Today, P-3 is included in state funding appropriations and the program has grown from the original 35 to over 200 classrooms statewide. Zion Chapel, as well as other schools in the state, has moved the whole child, playful approach to learning through second grade. ADECE is now in partnership with University of Alabama (UA) and the University of Alabama in Birmingham (UAB) to research and identify the components that contribute to the success of the P3 initiative which will help other schools replicate and sustain the model. In addition to the research with UA/UAB, the ADECE continues to partner with teachers and administrators, with assistance from P3 coaches, to support student outcomes.

This was my first visit to Alabama. I was able to visit some places of wonderful natural beauty (e.g., Dauphin Island). I had some food I had never had before (boiled peanuts—very tasty!). And I learned that the state is navigating the paradoxes between play and school through different programs and departments, meeting children's social, emotional and academic needs.



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March 28, 2023

Launching A Pedagogy of Play—the book!

Megan Siwek



Since 2015, our research team—Pedagogy of Play—has sought to answer three key questions: Why do educators need a pedagogy of play? What does playful learning look and feel like in classrooms and schools? How do educators set up the conditions where playful learning thrives?

We are so excited to finally share some answers to these questions in our new book, **A Pedagogy of Play: Supporting playful learning in classrooms and schools!** Visit our website to download [a free PDF](#) copy of the book or [purchase a hard copy](#) through the publishing platform Lulu. *Spanish and Chinese translations will be available for download soon. Stay tuned!*

In addition to our book, our [website](#) has many FREE resources organized into new tabs at the top. Visit our **Key Ideas** tab for a more detailed look at six core principles of a pedagogy of play, a closer look at what playful learning means and looks like, and key playful



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learning practices and strategies. The **For Educators** tab is exactly as it sounds –a page offering tools, strategies, and guides to support playful learning and teaching in the classroom and school, across ages and contexts. Lastly, the **For Teacher Educators** page includes a 14-week curriculum for introducing preservice candidates to playful learning. This page includes a suggested syllabus, modules for each week, activities, assignments, and videos to support pre-service teacher candidates' playful learning.

Enjoy!



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June 30, 2023

Building engagement: “Low floors, High ceilings and Wide walls” in playful learning environments

Fabián Dulcé, Isabel Tejada, Paula García, Jimena Alviar, & Martha Ramirez

Introduction

Welcome to our third post of this mini-series on playful learning in Higher Education settings! *You will find [a Spanish version of this post here](#).*

In our previous posts we described the process we navigated to come up with our own indicators of playful learning in higher education: Engagement, Challenge and Feedback. Such indicators have been crucial elements to design and implement playful classes in which students are placed in the center of their processes for meaningful learning experiences.

Our approach in coming up with these indicators has been informed mainly by two theories. On the one hand, they not only portray culture-specific aspects from our settings, which is a key element to consider, but also each one of them adds up to consolidate a flow state in our students' learning experience based on [Mihaly](#).



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Csikszentmihalyi's framework where: *goals are clear, feedback is immediate, the skills match the challenges, concentration is deep, problems are forgotten, control is possible, self-consciousness disappears, the sense of time is altered, and the experience is autotelic (it is worth it on its own).* On the other hand, we aim at fostering the characteristics of a growth mindset in our students; we do so by implementing Carol Dweck's theory. In a nutshell, she claims that there are five situations which can trigger either a fixed or a growth mindset response or behavior: challenges, obstacles, effort, criticism, and success of others. We can connect any of these five situations to playful learning practices, thus the importance of constructing a growth mindset environment. By identifying how these daily-life situations affect us, we can embrace them as valuable learning experiences.

This post will focus on the first indicator: Engagement. In our previous post, we stated that Engagement was the most observable indicator since, as teachers, we can actually see when students are involved and present in the tasks we design. We also described it as the disposition students activate in order to put effort and energy into their learning processes making use of their cognitive and metacognitive skills (see Blumenfeld et al.'s work).

Let's start by clarifying what we understand by engagement so that we can identify what it looks and feels like within playful and active teaching experiences.



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Understanding engagement

Engagement can be the heart and soul of a playful learning experience. It fills students with the energy, interest and willingness to put into using their skills and knowledge. In this line, based on [Shernoff's framework](#), *engagement* appears as a multidimensional state that anchors positive emotions, behaviors and cognitions, which supports learning to provide students with beneficial outcomes in terms of academic achievement ([See Macklem's work](#)). Moreover, engagement requires a hands-on/minds-on setting that provides opportunities for students to be immersed in the task and in a state of flow that allows them to self-direct their learning, to stay curious, to make use of their cognitive skills, and to solve problems on their own ([See Zosh, et al.](#)). In other words, engagement is the extent to which individuals are involved, motivated, and committed to a particular activity or task.

Low Floors and High Ceilings for engagement

The concept of "low floors and high ceilings" in playful learning refers to the idea of creating learning environments that are both accessible and challenging for all learners. A low floor means that the initial level of difficulty of a task or learning activity is set low enough that everyone can access it. In contrast, a high ceiling provides opportunities for deeper exploration and extension beyond the basic level. In addition, we embrace the concept of Wide Walls by [Mitchel Resnick](#) so as to provide



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students with multiple “pathways from floors to ceilings”.

As such, we have experienced that as we design low floors, high ceilings and wide walls in our playful pedagogical environments, we create engaging and tinkering opportunities for everyone.

What engagement looks like

To foster student engagement, we've identified key elements that can be observed. We've noticed that learning through engagement is more likely to occur when two or more of these elements come together. Therefore, in an active teaching approach like PoP, we aim to create a learning environment where students experience these emotions and actions simultaneously. For example, focused attention combined with interaction or decision-making leads to meaningful learning. By recognizing and promoting these factors mindfully, we enhance engagement and create a favorable atmosphere for growth:

Reflection involves taking time to consider and analyze one's own thoughts, feelings, and actions related to a particular topic or experience. Even though it is a cognitive process, it can be made visible. This might take the form of writing, engaging in a conversation with others, sharing thoughts and ideas, asking questions, or participating in structured activities such as



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brainstorming, mind mapping, or role-playing.

Focused attention involves concentrating one's mental energy on a specific task or concept. In a learning environment, this might include activities such as listening carefully to a lecture, reading a textbook, or practicing a new skill with close attention to detail. This might take the form of puzzle-solving, memory games, sketchnoting, musical and physical activities. Even though focused attention is a necessary component of engagement, it is not sufficient on its own. Here a sense of connection, purpose, and meaning in what is being done is key.

Decision-making involves reflection to prioritize and make thoughtful and informed decisions. Playful learning requires making choices, approaching problems, and completing tasks. Thus, decision-making may be facilitated through structured playful activities such as board games, escape rooms, breakout edus, serious games, creative projects, or simulations.

Movement can help students to engage their bodies as well as their minds. This might



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involve activities such as dancing, yoga, or other forms of physical activity, or more structured activities such as role-playing, improv, scavenger hunts, or simulations.

Participation involves investment/active participation and contribution from students to a target activity. This might involve asking and answering questions, working on group projects, or participating in class discussions or any of the previously mentioned activities.

Collaboration involves working together with others towards a common goal. In a learning environment, collaboration may be facilitated through activities such as team building activities, role-playing games, escape rooms, group projects, design competitions or hackathons.

Negotiation involves finding common ground and reaching agreements between different parties. In a learning environment, negotiation may be required when working on group projects, resolving conflicts, or negotiating deadlines. In a playful environment this looks like mock trials, business simulations, role-play exercises and negotiation games.



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Interaction involves communication and engagement between individuals towards a common goal. In a learning environment, interaction may occur through activities that involve two or more people. Within a playful perspective, all activities with two or more participants generally require interaction to take place.

What engagement feels like

Enjoyment is a positive emotional state that arises from engaging in an activity, experience, or interaction. It involves feelings of pleasure and satisfaction; it is also a state of optimal experience (make sure to check Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory) when an individual is fully participating in a challenging yet achievable activity.

Enthusiasm is characterized by a fervent and lively approach towards a given task. It is accompanied by a profound interest in learning, as well as willingness and eagerness to delve deeper.

Inspiration is a state of excitement, motivation, and creativity that learners experience when exposed to



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new ideas, concepts, or experiences. It encourages learners to explore beyond their comfort zone and strive for personal growth and development.

Being at ease involves feeling comfortable and relaxed, which enables stress-free learning experiences. It requires a sense of emotional security and psychological safety that encourages students to take risks, ask questions, be vulnerable, and make mistakes without fearing negative consequences or judgment.

Confidence involves having a positive self-assessment and a belief in one's ability to acquire and apply knowledge effectively. When learners have confidence, they are more likely to take risks, challenge themselves, and actively engage in the learning process.

Curiosity in learning is the natural tendency to explore and seek out new information and experiences. It encompasses the desire to understand the world around us, ask questions, and challenge assumptions. Curiosity is at the heart of tinkering.



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Belonging involves a sense of connection, community, and inclusion. When learners develop a sense of belonging, they feel accepted and valued and are more likely to engage actively in the learning process and collaborate with others, leading to greater motivation and persistence in the face of challenges.

Pride is the feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction when learners successfully acquire new knowledge or skills. It involves a positive self-assessment, personal fulfillment, and motivation to continue learning. It leads to a positive attitude towards learning and higher engagement and persistence in the face of challenges.

In sum, engagement involves the disposition of students to put effort and energy into their learning processes, making use of their cognitive and metacognitive skills. It requires a hands-on/minds-on setting that provides opportunities for students to be immersed in the task and in a state of flow that allows them to experience positive emotions, self-direct their learning, stay curious, and solve problems on their own. Designing low floors, high ceilings and wide walls in playful pedagogical environments captivates students and creates engaging opportunities for everyone.



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Engaged students are characterized by their reflection, focused attention, decision-making, movement, participation, collaboration, negotiation, and interaction.

Stay tuned for our next posts on challenge and feedback, our remaining indicators for playful learning in Higher Ed!

Ideas to foster engagement

To illustrate what engagement looks like and feels like in our classes, we will present some ideas and strategies.

Jimena

Class: E-learning for English as Foreign Language contexts

Theme: E-learning trends

Students: Undergraduate students of BA of Bilingualism

I adapted *Shark Tank*, one of the most popular realities in the entrepreneurship world, to our E-learning class to challenge my students to be innovative and creative when describing the characteristics of E-learning trends, and to be critical when making instructional decisions in a specific educational context. For this learning experience, I told students they were in charge of improving the English classes of our BA of Bilingualism program by implementing a specific e-learning trend, and that one of their proposals would be chosen as the innovative solution our University needed. To



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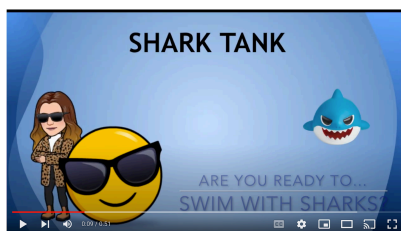
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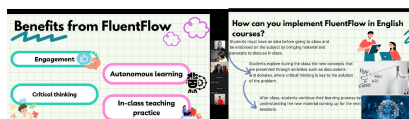
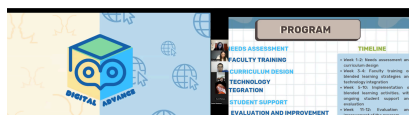
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explain that context, I created a video that set the storyline of our session, which resulted as one of the most engaging and motivating factors due to its personalization! Then, by means of a specific checklist and scaffolding, teams worked to design and present their Pitch to the “shark” (who was me); I asked them several questions for them to argue their proposals. Students were deeply engaged in the design, pitch and argumentation processes of this experience. At the end, teams received “badges” to reward their efforts in terms of creativity, innovation, selling attitude, design skills, etc.

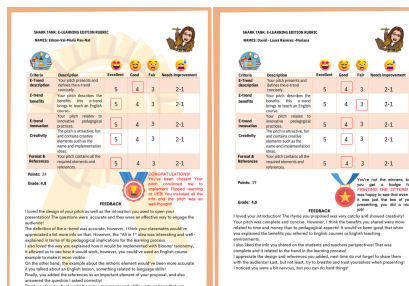


Shark tank: E-Learning Edition



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Martha

Class: Growth Mindset for leadership and communication

Theme: The role of grit in mindset

Students: Leaders of different companies in Colombia

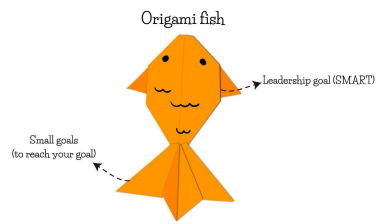
I used origami in this class with three purposes: a) as a means to write down a personal leadership objective, b) connect the act of doing origami with perseverance (a component of grit) and c) embed storytelling in the classroom. Students were asked to write a goal in an origami paper. Then, they used that paper to create the body of a koi fish. Next, they wrote smaller objectives that would lead to the fulfillment of the goal in another origami paper. Afterwards, they used that paper to create the fish tail (which is more difficult). Finally they were told the tale of the Koi fish that became a dragon and reflected on its connection to grit.





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Isabel

Class: Interculturality, language, and education



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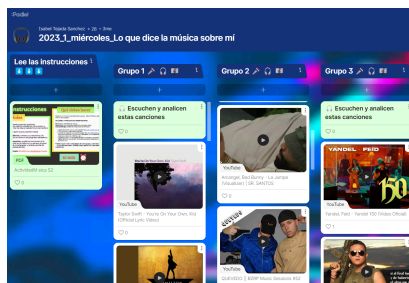
Students: Undergraduate students from all majors

Theme: Intercultural awareness through the analysis of musical preferences

I use songs in this activity called *What does music say about me?* with the purpose of promoting self-awareness by analyzing the musical preferences of others. I ask each student to write down their top three favorite songs, which are then anonymously posted on a Padlet wall in separate columns. Then, I create random groups, and within these each student assumes a different role, either as a DJ, a composer, or an audience member. Each group discusses the emotions that the songs trigger and describes them using Brackett's mood meter. They also consider whether they know the song (or the artist) and imagine the type of person who would have it as a favorite. This activity fosters diversity appreciation, enthusiasm, trust, respect, and curiosity. The activity concludes with a reflection exercise, where students gain self-knowledge by recognizing how their experiences, assumptions, and prejudices shape their interpretation of others' preferences, feelings, and behaviors.



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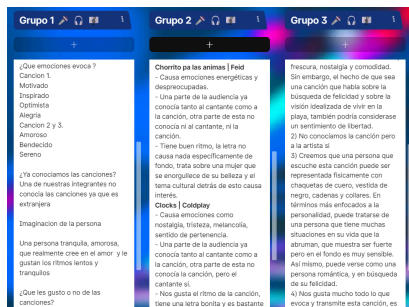
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Paula

Class: Multilingual learning and teaching trajectories

Theme: Using all the students' linguistic repertoire while learning additional languages.

Students: In-service language teachers at the master's level.

One strategy I use to engage my students with the learning goal and the proposed activities is to make sure they find a personal connection to the class concepts; in this case, to reflect on the relevance of recognizing, valuing, and using everyone's sets of language variations, students drew their own bodies and represented where they felt the languages they speak and teach. During the class discussion, they reported sensations, ideas, experiences, and ideas related to how they have experienced their own languages.



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Fabian

Class: Innovation, Leadership & Engineering Design (undergraduate elective course).

Theme: Design Thinking.

Students: Undergraduate students of Mechanical Engineering.

A typical engineering quiz designed apparently to review some concepts about the design thinking process. In reality it was intended to playfully determine how students formulate their strategy for solving the quiz. The quiz consists of 2 parts and each part awards 50% of the final grade. Students may use any help they want (notes, internet, etc.). The teacher also introduces students to the help of a good friend named Orlo, an 'enlightened' and 'magical being' (like an oracle) who knows everything and is willing to quickly tell whoever emails him the answer to the second part of the quiz. Most students do not trust Orlo and do not write to him (90% of the class on average), but those who risk writing to him get surprised because they receive



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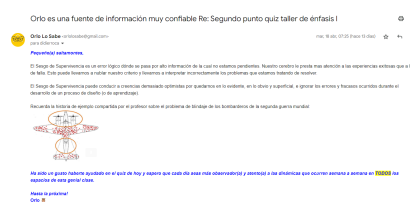
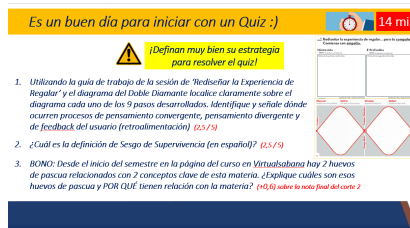
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the correct answer within 10 seconds (Orlo is a programmed email with automatic response). The purpose of the quiz is not only to assess knowledge but to identify what kind of decisions they make as engineers when emergent information appears in an agile problem-solving process. Debriefing with students is impactful because they think that the help offered by the teacher is to distract them so that they do poorly on the quiz. The students like the experience with Orlo so much that they continue to write to “him” to tinker and ask any kind of questions. Engagement is so good that they have even asked questions about the meaning of life, or about doubts from other courses!



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About the authors

Fabián Dulcé is an edupreneur and a highly curious lifelong learner. Passionate about making things





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different in education; enjoys integrating game and lean-agile thinking to create innovative learning experiences. Since 2013 he's been working in varied educational institutions in Colombia as a trainer, lecturer, researcher and consultant.

Isabel Tejada is a Professor at the School of Education at Los Andes University (Bogotá). She's a passionate and playful life-long learner, growth mindsetter, and intercultural educator.

Paula García teaches future teachers at the School of Education at Universidad de Los Andes, Colombia. She has devoted her life to learning through a number of approaches, and found playful learning one of the most challenging ways to make sure learning happens and stays.

Jimena Alviar is a proud and passionate English teacher who has devoted more than 10 years to exploring engaging and playful learning scenarios. Her curious and committed teaching spirit has allowed her to apply and navigate different teaching approaches with a varied range of students from preschool to higher education.

Martha Ramirez is a teacher educator, academic consultant and researcher specialized in flipped learning and growth mindset. Throughout her teaching career, she has sought ways to teach outside the box: playful learning has been one of the key approaches she uses in every teaching scenario she can.



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July 5, 2023

Construyendo el Enganche: "Suelos bajos, Techos altos y Paredes anchas" en ambientes de aprendizaje a través del juego 💡

Fabián Dulcé, Isabel Tejada, Paula García, Jimena Alviar, & Martha Ramirez

[English version](#)

Introducción

¡Bienvenidos a nuestro tercer post de esta miniserie sobre Aprendizaje a Través del Juego en contextos de Educación Superior! Como es habitual, encontrarás también [una versión en inglés de este post aquí](#).

En nuestros posts anteriores describimos el proceso que navegamos para llegar a nuestros propios indicadores de aprendizaje a través del juego en educación superior: *Enganche*, *Desafío* y *Retroalimentación*. Dichos indicadores han sido elementos cruciales para diseñar e implementar clases lúdicas en las que los estudiantes se encuentran en el centro de sus procesos para lograr experiencias de aprendizaje significativas.

Nuestro enfoque a la hora de construir estos indicadores se ha basado



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principalmente en dos teorías. Por un lado, los indicadores no sólo representan aspectos específicos de la cultura de nuestros ambientes de aprendizaje, lo cual es un elemento clave a tener en cuenta, sino que cada uno de ellos se suma para consolidar un estado de flujo en la experiencia de aprendizaje de nuestros estudiantes basado en el marco de Mihaly

Csikszentmihalyi en el cual *los objetivos son claros, la retroalimentación es inmediata, las habilidades armonizan con los retos, la concentración es profunda, los problemas se olvidan, el control es posible, la autoconciencia desaparece, el sentido del tiempo se altera y la experiencia es autotélica (es decir, que vale la pena por sí misma)*. Por otro lado, le apuntamos a fomentar las características de una mentalidad de crecimiento en nuestros estudiantes; esto lo hacemos implementando la teoría de Carol Dweck. En síntesis, ella menciona que hay cinco situaciones que pueden detonar una respuesta o un comportamiento de mentalidad fija o de crecimiento: los retos, los obstáculos, el esfuerzo, la crítica y el éxito de los demás. Podemos conectar cualquiera de estas cinco situaciones con prácticas de aprendizaje a través del juego, de ahí la importancia de construir un entorno de mentalidad de crecimiento. Al identificar cómo nos afectan estas situaciones de la vida cotidiana, podemos adoptarlas como valiosas experiencias de aprendizaje.

Este post se centrará en el primer indicador: *Enganche*. En nuestro post anterior, afirmábamos que el enganche era el indicador más observable ya que, como profesores, podemos ver



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realmente cuándo los estudiantes se involucran y están presentes en las actividades que diseñamos. También lo describíamos como la disposición que los estudiantes activan para invertir esfuerzo y energía en sus procesos de aprendizaje haciendo uso de sus habilidades cognitivas y metacognitivas ([ver el trabajo de Blumenfeld et al.](#)).

Empecemos por aclarar qué entendemos por enganche de manera que podamos identificar cómo se ve y cómo se siente dentro de experiencias de enseñanza lúdicas y activas.

Entendiendo el Enganche

El enganche puede ser el corazón y el alma de una experiencia de aprendizaje a través del juego. Llena a los alumnos de energía, interés y disposición de poner en práctica sus habilidades y conocimientos. En línea con esta idea, y basándonos en [el marco de Shernoff](#), el enganche aparece como un estado multidimensional que ancla emociones positivas, comportamientos y cogniciones, el cual apoya el aprendizaje para proporcionar a los estudiantes resultados beneficiosos en términos del éxito académico ([ver el trabajo de Macklem](#)). Además, el enganche requiere de un ambiente práctico experiencial y consciente que ofrezca oportunidades a los estudiantes para sumergirse en la actividad y en un estado de flujo que les permita autodirigir su aprendizaje, mantener la curiosidad, hacer uso de sus habilidades cognitivas y resolver problemas por sí mismos ([ver Zosh, et al.](#)). En otras palabras, el enganche es el grado de implicación, motivación y



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compromiso con el cual los individuos asumen una actividad o tarea particular.

Suelos Bajos y Techos Altos para el Enganche

El concepto de "suelos bajos y techos altos" en el aprendizaje a través del juego se refiere a la idea de crear entornos de aprendizaje que sean a la vez accesibles y desafiantes para todos los aprendices. Un suelo bajo significa que el nivel inicial de dificultad de una tarea o actividad de aprendizaje es lo suficientemente bajo como para que todo el mundo pueda acceder. Un techo alto ofrece oportunidades para una exploración más profunda e ir más allá del nivel básico. Adicionalmente, adoptamos el concepto de "Paredes Anchas" de [Mitchel Resnick](#) para ofrecer a los estudiantes múltiples "caminos desde el suelo hasta el techo". Desde nuestra experiencia, hemos comprobado que cuando diseñamos suelos bajos, techos altos y paredes anchas en nuestros contextos pedagógicos lúdicos, creamos oportunidades enganchadoras y con posibilidades de 'cacharreo' (*tinkering*) para todos.

Cómo se Ve el Enganche

Para fomentar el enganche de los estudiantes, hemos identificado elementos clave que se pueden observar. Hemos notado que es más probable que el aprendizaje a través del enganche se produzca cuando confluyen dos o más de estos elementos. Por lo tanto, bajo un enfoque



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de enseñanza activa como el de la Pedagogía del Juego (PoP), nuestro objetivo es crear un ambiente de aprendizaje en el que los estudiantes experimenten estas emociones y acciones simultáneamente. Por ejemplo, la atención focalizada combinada con la interacción o la toma de decisiones conduce a un aprendizaje significativo. Al reconocer y promover estos factores de forma consciente, aumentamos el enganche y creamos una atmósfera favorable para el crecimiento:

La **Reflexión** implica dedicar tiempo a considerar y analizar los propios pensamientos, sentimientos y acciones relacionados con un tema o experiencia concreta. Aunque se trata de un proceso cognitivo, puede hacerse visible. Esto puede hacerse escribiendo, estimulando conversaciones con otros, compartiendo pensamientos e ideas, haciendo preguntas, o participando en actividades estructuradas como lluvias de ideas, mapas mentales o juegos de roles.

La **Atención Focalizada** consiste en concentrar la energía mental en una tarea o concepto específico. En un ambiente de aprendizaje, esto puede incluir actividades como escuchar atentamente una cátedra, leer un libro o practicar una nueva habilidad prestando especial atención a



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los detalles. También puede consistir en resolver rompecabezas, juegos de memoria, crear notas visuales o actividades musicales y físicas. Aunque la atención focalizada es un componente necesario del enganche, no es suficiente por sí sola. Aquí es clave un sentido de conexión, propósito y significado de lo que se está haciendo.

La **Toma de Decisiones**

involucra reflexionar para establecer prioridades y tomar decisiones informadas y con criterio. El aprendizaje a través del juego requiere elegir, abordar problemas y completar tareas. Así, la toma de decisiones puede facilitarse mediante actividades lúdicas estructuradas, como juegos de mesa, *escape rooms*, *breakouts* educativos, juegos serios, proyectos creativos o simulaciones.

El **Movimiento** puede ayudar a los estudiantes a involucrar tanto sus cuerpos como sus mentes. Esto puede implicar actividades como el baile, el yoga u otras formas de actividad física, o actividades más estructuradas como juegos de roles, improvisación, búsquedas del tesoro o simulaciones.



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La **Participación** implica la inversión/participación activa y la contribución de los estudiantes a una actividad. Puede consistir en formular y responder preguntas, trabajar en proyectos grupales o participar en debates en clase o en cualquiera de las actividades mencionadas anteriormente.

La **Colaboración** tiene que ver con trabajar junto con otros para perseguir un objetivo común. En un ambiente de aprendizaje, la colaboración puede facilitarse por medio de actividades como el desarrollo de equipos, juegos de roles, *escape rooms*, proyectos grupales, concursos de diseño o hackatones.

La **Negociación** consiste en encontrar un terreno común y llegar a acuerdos entre diferentes partes. En un ambiente de aprendizaje, la negociación puede requerirse cuando se trabaja en proyectos grupales, se resuelven conflictos o se negocian plazos. En un ambiente lúdico, esto se ve en juicios simulados, simulaciones empresariales, juegos de roles y juegos de negociación.



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La **Interacción** implica la comunicación y el



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involucramiento entre individuos para lograr un objetivo común. En un ambiente de aprendizaje, la interacción puede darse a través de actividades que incluyan a dos o más personas. Desde una perspectiva lúdica, todas las actividades con dos o más participantes suelen requerir que ocurra una interacción.

Cómo se siente el Enganche

El **Disfrute** es un estado emocional positivo que surge al engancharse con una actividad, experiencia o interacción. Implica sentimientos de placer y satisfacción; también es un estado de experiencia óptima (asegúrate de revisar la teoría de flujo de [Csikszentmihalyi](#)) cuando una persona participa plenamente en una actividad desafiante pero alcanzable.

El **Entusiasmo** se caracteriza por una aproximación ferviente y animada hacia una tarea dada. Va acompañado por un profundo interés por aprender, así como de voluntad y ganas de ir más allá.

La **Inspiración** es un estado de excitación, motivación y creatividad que los aprendices



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experimentan cuando se exponen a nuevas ideas, conceptos o experiencias. Anima a los estudiantes a explorar más allá de su zona de confort y a esforzarse por crecer y desarrollarse personalmente.

Sentirse a Gusto significa sentirse cómodo y relajado, lo que habilita experiencias de aprendizaje sin estrés. Requiere un sentido de seguridad emocional y psicológica que anime a los estudiantes a tomar riesgos, hacer preguntas, ser vulnerables y cometer errores sin temer consecuencias negativas ni ser juzgados.

La **Seguridad** tiene que ver con tener una autoevaluación positiva y creer en la capacidad personal para adquirir y aplicar los conocimientos con eficacia. Cuando los estudiantes tienen seguridad, es más probable que asuman riesgos, se desafíen a sí mismos y participen activamente en el proceso de aprendizaje.

La **Curiosidad** en el aprendizaje es la tendencia natural a explorar y buscar información y experiencias nuevas. Abarca el deseo de comprender el mundo que nos rodea, cuestionar y desafiar las



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suposiciones. La curiosidad es la base para el 'cacharreo' (*tinkering*).

La **Pertenencia** implica un sentido de conexión, comunidad e inclusión. Cuando los estudiantes desarrollan un sentido de pertenencia se sienten aceptados y valorados y es más probable que se enganchen activamente en el proceso de aprendizaje y colaboren con los demás, lo que conduce a una mayor motivación y persistencia ante los retos.

El **Orgullo** es el sentimiento de logro y de satisfacción cuando los estudiantes adquieren nuevos conocimientos o destrezas satisfactoriamente. Está relacionado con una autoevaluación positiva, realización personal y motivación para seguir aprendiendo. Lleva a una actitud positiva hacia el aprendizaje y a un mayor enganche y persistencia ante los retos.

En resumen, el enganche implica la disposición de los estudiantes a poner esfuerzo y energía en sus procesos de aprendizaje, haciendo uso de sus habilidades cognitivas y metacognitivas. Requiere de un ambiente práctico experiencial y consciente que ofrezca oportunidades a



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los estudiantes para sumergirse en la actividad y en un estado de flujo que les permita autodirigir su aprendizaje, mantener la curiosidad, y resolver problemas por sí mismos. Diseñar suelos bajos, techos altos y paredes anchas en ambientes pedagógicos lúdicos cautiva a los estudiantes y crea oportunidades atractivas para todos. Los estudiantes enganchados se caracterizan por su reflexión, atención enfocada, toma de decisiones, movimiento, participación, colaboración, negociación e interacción.

¡Permanece atento a nuestras próximas publicaciones sobre los indicadores de *Desafío y Retroalimentación*, nuestros indicadores restantes para el aprendizaje a través del juego en contextos de educación superior!

Ideas para promover el enganche

Para ilustrar cómo se ve y cómo se siente el Enganche en nuestras clases, presentamos algunas ideas y estrategias.

Jimena

Asignatura: E-Learning for English Foreign Language Contexts.

Contenido temático: Tendencias en E-Learning.

Estudiantes: Estudiantes de Pregrado Licenciatura en Bilingüismo con Énfasis en la Enseñanza del Inglés.

Para nuestra clase de E-learning adapté *Shark Tank*, uno de los realities más populares en el mundo del emprendimiento, para desafiar a mis



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alumnos a ser innovadores y creativos al describir las características de las tendencias de e-learning, y a ser críticos al tomar decisiones para diseño instruccional en un contexto educativo específico. Para esta experiencia de aprendizaje, le planteé a los estudiantes que tenían el rol de mejorar las clases de inglés de nuestro programa de licenciatura en bilingüismo mediante la implementación de una tendencia específica de e-learning, y que una de sus propuestas sería elegida como la solución innovadora que nuestra universidad necesitaba. Para explicar ese contexto, creé un vídeo que establecía el argumento de nuestra sesión de trabajo, ¡que resultó ser uno de los factores más atractivos y motivadores debido a su personalización! Luego, mediante una lista de verificación y un andamiaje específico, los equipos trabajaron para diseñar y presentar su pitch al "tiburón" (que era yo); les hice varias preguntas para que justificaran sus propuestas. Los estudiantes se engancharon a fondo en los procesos de diseño, presentación y argumentación de esta experiencia. Al final, los equipos recibieron insignias para premiar sus esfuerzos en términos de creatividad, innovación, actitud de venta, habilidades de diseño, etc.



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Shark tank: E-Learning Edition

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Martha

Asignatura: Mentalidad de Crecimiento para el Liderazgo y la Comunicación.

Contenido temático: El rol de la determinación en la mentalidad.

Estudiantes: Líderes de diferentes compañías en Colombia

Utilicé la técnica de origami en esta clase con tres propósitos: a) como medio para escribir un objetivo personal de liderazgo, b) conectar el acto de hacer origami con la perseverancia (un componente de la determinación), y c) integrar la narración de historias en el aula. Se le pidió a los estudiantes que escribieran un objetivo en un papel de origami. Después, utilizaron ese papel para crear el cuerpo de un pez koi. Luego, escribieron en otro papel de origami objetivos más pequeños que llevarían a la consecución del objetivo global. Enseguida, utilizaron ese papel para crear la cola del pez (que es más difícil). Por último, conocieron la



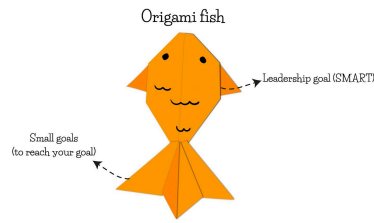
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leyenda del pez koi que se transformó en dragón y reflexionaron sobre su conexión con la determinación.

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Isabel

Asignatura: Interculturalidad, lenguaje y educación

Contenido temático: La conciencia intercultural a través del análisis de las preferencias musicales.

Estudiantes: Estudiantes de pregrado de todos los programas académicos.

Utilizo canciones en esta actividad llamada *¿Qué dice la música de mí?* con el propósito de promover la autoconciencia mediante el análisis de las preferencias musicales de los demás. Le pido a cada estudiante que escriba sus tres canciones favoritas, las cuales se publican anónimamente en un tablero Padlet en columnas separadas. Luego, creo grupos aleatorios, y dentro de ellos cada estudiante asume un rol diferente, puede ser como DJ, compositor o miembro de la audiencia. Cada grupo discute las emociones que provocan las canciones y las describe utilizando el medidor de Brackett de estados de ánimo. También consideran si conocen la canción (o al artista) e imaginan el tipo de persona que la tendría como favorita. Esta actividad fomenta la apreciación de la diversidad, el entusiasmo, la confianza, el respeto y la curiosidad. La actividad concluye con un ejercicio de reflexión, en el que los estudiantes adquieren autoconocimiento al reconocer cómo sus experiencias, suposiciones y prejuicios moldean su interpretación de las preferencias, sentimientos y comportamientos de los demás.



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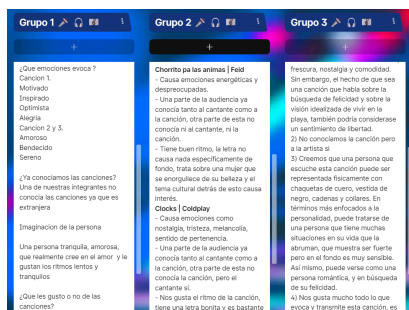
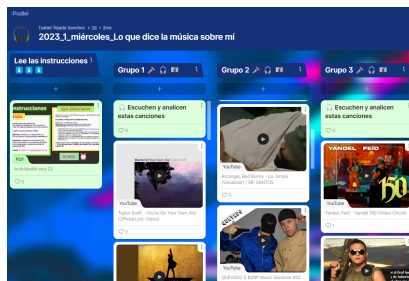
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Paula

Asignatura: Trayectorias de Aprendizaje Multilingüe.

Contenido temático: Utilización de todo el repertorio lingüístico de los estudiantes en el aprendizaje de lenguas adicionales.

Estudiantes: Profesores de idiomas del programa de maestría.

Una estrategia que utilizo para enganchar a mis estudiantes con el objetivo de aprendizaje y las actividades propuestas es asegurarme de que encuentran una conexión personal con los conceptos de la clase; en este caso, para reflexionar sobre la relevancia de reconocer, valorar y utilizar los conjuntos de variaciones lingüísticas de cada uno, los estudiantes dibujaron sus propios cuerpos y representaron dónde sentían las lenguas que hablan y enseñan. Durante el debate en clase, relataron sensaciones, experiencias e



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ideas relacionadas con cómo han vivido sus propias lenguas.



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Fabián

Asignatura: Innovación, Liderazgo y Diseño en Ingeniería.

Contenido temático: Design Thinking.

Estudiantes: Estudiantes de pregrado de Ingeniería Mecánica.

Es una típica experiencia de un quiz de ingeniería diseñado aparentemente para evaluar conceptos sobre el proceso del pensamiento de diseño. En realidad el quiz tiene la intención de evidenciar cómo los estudiantes plantean su estrategia para resolverlo. El quiz consta de 2 partes y cada parte otorga el 50% de la nota final. Los estudiantes pueden utilizar cualquier ayuda que quieran (apuntes, internet, etc.). El profesor también presenta a los estudiantes la ayuda de un buen amigo llamado Orlo, un ser de luz mágico (como un oráculo) que todo lo sabe y que está dispuesto a decirle rápidamente a quien le escriba por correo electrónico la respuesta de la segunda parte del quiz. La mayoría de los estudiantes no confían en Orlo y no le escriben (el 90% de la clase en



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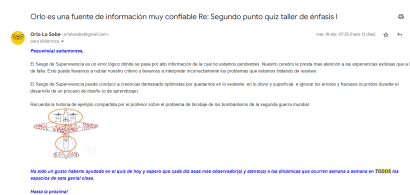
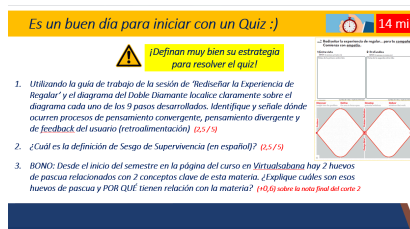
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promedio). Aquellos que se arriesgan a escribirle se sorprenden porque reciben la respuesta correcta al cabo de 10 segundos y ganan tiempo (Orlo es un correo electrónico programado con respuesta automática). El propósito del quiz no consiste en evaluar conocimientos sino en identificar qué tipo de decisiones toman como ingenieros cuando emerge información en un proceso ágil de solución de problemas. La reflexión final con los estudiantes es siempre impactante porque ellos piensan que la ayuda que ofrece el profesor es para distraerlos para que les vaya mal en el quiz y no para ayudarlos. A los estudiantes les gusta tanto la experiencia con Orlo que le continúan escribiendo para hacerle cualquier tipo de preguntas, ¡incluso le han hecho preguntas sobre el sentido de la vida, o sobre dudas de otros cursos!



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Sobre los autores:

Fabián Dulcé es un edupreneur y un aprendiz permanente muy curioso. Apasionado por hacer las cosas diferentes en la educación; disfruta



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integrando el juego y el pensamiento lean-agile para crear experiencias de aprendizaje innovadoras. Desde 2013 ha trabajado en diversas instituciones educativas de Colombia como formador, conferencista, investigador y consultor.

Isabel Tejada es profesora en la Facultad de Educación de la Universidad de Los Andes (Bogotá). Es una educadora intercultural y aprendiz permanente de la vida, apasionada por el aprendizaje a través del juego y la mentalidad de crecimiento.

Paula García enseña a futuros maestros en la Facultad de Educación de la Universidad de Los Andes, Colombia. Ha dedicado su vida al aprendizaje a través de una serie de enfoques y descubrió que el aprendizaje lúdico es una de las formas más desafiantes de asegurarse de que el aprendizaje suceda y se mantenga.

Jimena Alviar es una profesora de inglés orgullosa y apasionada que ha dedicado más de 10 años a explorar escenarios de aprendizaje atractivos y divertidos. Su espíritu de enseñanza curioso y comprometido le ha permitido aplicar y navegar diferentes enfoques de enseñanza con una amplia gama de estudiantes desde preescolar hasta educación superior.

Martha Ramírez es formadora de docentes, consultora académica e investigadora especializada en Flipped Learning y mentalidad de crecimiento. A lo largo de su carrera docente, ha buscado formas de enseñar fuera de la caja: el aprendizaje basado en juegos ha



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sido uno de los enfoques clave que utiliza en todos los escenarios de enseñanza que puede.

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August 7, 2023

Transforming Education with Play-Based Learning: A New Zealand Success Story

Sarah Aiono, guest author

Sarah is a researcher, educator, and passionate play advocate with a Doctor of Education degree from Massey University in New Zealand. Having finished her doctoral research in 2020, she explored the influence of professional development on primary classroom play practices, identifying a set of teaching practices associated with optimal play pedagogy for children aged 5 – 12 years of age. As CEO of Longworth Education, Sarah leads a team of facilitators working across New Zealand schools, to coach teachers towards incorporating play pedagogy into daily



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classroom routines and embedding teaching practices that ensure quality teaching within play-based learning environments.

St Patrick's School in Napier, New Zealand, serves a rich and diverse community and is home to approximately 385 students between the ages of 5 and 13. The school structure marries the old with the new, blending traditional single classrooms with contemporary open-plan shared hubs. As a researcher and play advocate, I was excited to experience firsthand a transformation unfolding in this educational setting.



"Band practice" on the school outside deck with loose parts, *photo courtesy Kaehler Dawson*



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The St Patrick's teaching community is actively making the journey from traditional teaching and learning education methods—whereby children are required to be seated, learning from



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the teacher positioned at the front of the class—to learning through play, sparked by the passionate advocacy of a schoolteacher in the junior school eight years ago. She recognised that children entering school needed a softer transition from play-based early learning childcare centers and kindergartens they were familiar with. She understood that play was a powerful vehicle to foster a sense of safety and trust among young students, preparing them for a gradual immersion into formal literacy and numeracy learning as they matured.

Heeding this insightful call, the junior school team bravely embarked on a journey to redefine their teaching environment. They transformed their classrooms into dynamic learning spaces, equipped for various play schemas that facilitated children in directing their own learning through play. They made room for explicit ‘workshop’ teaching of literacy and numeracy. Adopting primarily a play-all-day approach to their timetable, teachers worked to achieve a balance between adult guided, playful learning, and student-centred, child-led play experiences.



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Student created slide using cardboard tubing on the playground, *photo courtesy Kaehler Dawson*

As the classroom environment became more child-centred and engaging, the teachers identified they needed professional development to understand and meet the curriculum learning needs emerging from the play they were observing. To achieve this, they partnered with Longworth Education, a play professional development provider in New Zealand (of which the author of this post is CEO). Longworth uses a unique method of PLD: practice-based coaching combined with the Play Based Learning Observation Tool (P-BLOT; Aiono & McLaughlin, 2018). This approach allowed the teachers to get hands-on training in their classrooms and practice in integrating the science behind play as a teaching method in





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their daily routines. The PLD enabled the teachers to dive deep into the New Zealand curriculum, using the 'Notice, Recognise and Respond' model and craft self-driving play learning opportunities for every student.

In New Zealand, the curriculum is centered around a competencies-based approach to learning. Through the lens of play pedagogy, St Patrick's School, like many others around New Zealand, is recognising that child-led play fosters these key competencies, which include self-management, creativity, problem-solving, risk-taking, relating to others, language development and cooperative learning.



Examining how a lawnmower works, *photo courtesy Kaehler Dawson*

Additionally, teachers using 'Notice, Recognise and Respond' can identify various academic areas reflected in children's self-directed play. These areas include science and technology, social sciences, the arts, health, and physical education. Rather than directing children into specific play activities established by the teacher,



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observational data is utilised to reveal and track the progress of students exploring key concepts and skills in their play, reflective of these curriculum areas. This data analysis enables teachers to respond to the natural inquiries that arise within child-led play or introduce new concepts related to the play that encourage alternative understanding and exploration.

As a result of the pedagogical shift to play, St Patrick's School is noticing tangible benefits for their students. School principal Gemma McLean shared that, despite interruptions and challenges such as COVID19 and extreme weather events in New Zealand, the school's attendance rates have remained at over 90% this year and the children have been actively engaged in their learning. Mrs. McLean explained that "...most importantly, our children are super happy to be at school. If you take a walk around our school, at any time of the day or week, you will see, hear, and feel the buzz. The children and staff are thriving in their environment. The children are experiencing success in their learning by following their strengths and interests. They are demonstrating key dispositions, such as curiosity, problem-solving and innovative thinking. School is their place and space. Teachers are motivated, energized and taking brave and bold risks by exploring play pedagogy. This takes them right out of their comfort zones, but we are all so excited about the journey we are on!"



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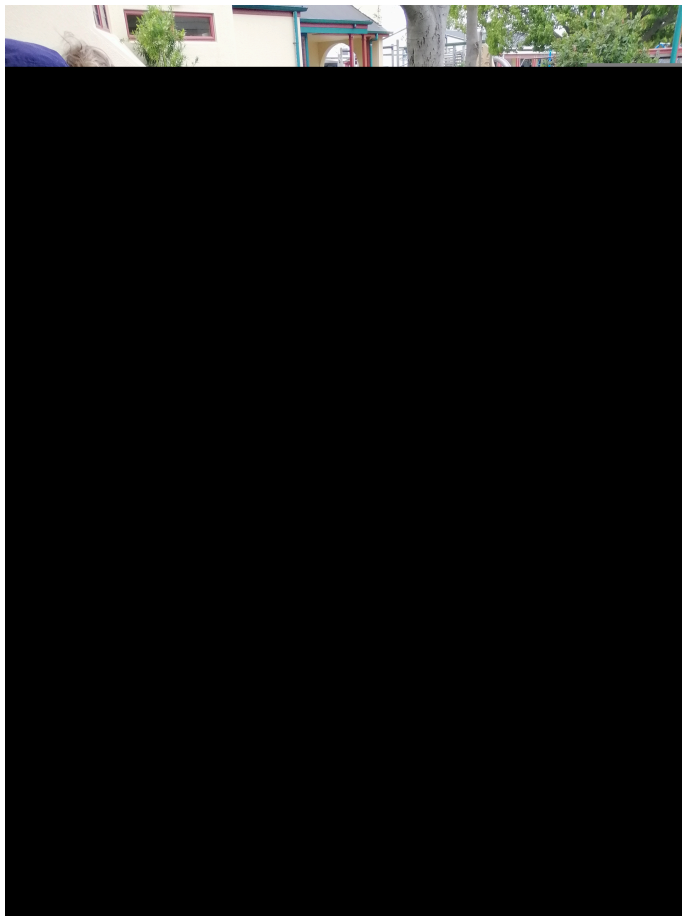
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Construction in the sandpit, *photo courtesy*
Kaehler Dawson

Kaehler Dawson, the Deputy Principal and Lead Play Coach at St Patrick's School, has observed that because of play pedagogy, the children know they belong, and their contribution is valued and celebrated. Students experience an environment that allows and encourages them to nurture the things they are passionate about. Teachers work hard, however, to ensure the environment provides plenty of opportunity to be challenged, but in a way that children remain autonomous. "Our students grow through their self-directed successes and failures, discovering what being a learner looks like and feels like. Being a learner is not defined by test scores or how quickly they can add, or how beautifully they can sit at a desk, for example."



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Walking around St Patrick's during the school day is an enlightening experience as a researcher and play advocate. The school has dedicated its efforts to harnessing play as an essential part of the educational journey for its students. It provides a rich example of the way in which play can be integrated into a school day with children of all ages.

Rather than kids seated at desks, with books open and glazed looks on their faces, the environment is filled with movement, engagement, excited voices, and a variety of creative and innovative learning experiences. It also reflects the importance of a tailored and evidence-based professional development approach for teachers to develop confidence in implementing play pedagogy in ways that ensure positive learning outcomes for students and teachers.



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February 20, 2024

No Feedback, No Flow for Higher Ed Playful Learning Design

Martha Ramirez, Fabián Dulcé,
Isabel Tejada, Paula García, Jimena
Alviar

Introduction

Welcome to the fourth post of our mini-series on playful learning in Higher Education settings! You can find a Spanish version of this post [here](#). This post focuses on what it looks like when *feedback* functions as a key indicator for playful classes from student and teacher perspectives: the first perspective refers to how students demonstrate learning experiences, and the latter touches upon the elements of feedback that educators offer to support playful learning.

Understanding feedback

We believe one of the caveats of including a playful learning approach in any education setting is creating an environment where learners feel comfortable taking risks and trying new things. This environment aligns with the principles of a growth mindset, as both emphasize the value of effort and the belief in the potential for improvement. In the same line, effective feedback aligns with the principles of a growth mindset by focusing on effort,



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strategies, and continuous improvement. When learners receive constructive feedback that highlights their progress and offers guidance for further development, they are more likely to view challenges as opportunities for growth.

Playful learning encourages learners to adapt, experiment, and iterate. Feedback focuses on progress and breakthroughs, designed not to boost students' self-esteem, but rather to note and point out their daily progress, encourage their participation, and stimulate their attention in a constructive way. It also implies an understanding of the fundamentals of learning: *that everyone must make an effort; that an answer must always be justified, assuming the risk of making a mistake; and that making mistakes (and correcting mistakes) is the only way to learn.*

We have found that playful learning and feedback can take on a two-fold relationship: on the one hand, playful learning activities are more meaningful when feedback is part of the equation; on the other hand, the way feedback is provided can be playful in itself.

Feedback is directly related to the other two indicators of playful learning we have proposed: when feedback is lacking, student engagement is stripped away and frustration sets in. Moreover, the nature of the feedback will set the stage for how *challenges* are framed, whether they are seen as exciting opportunities to learn and improve (growth mindset), or as threats to our students' self-worth (fixed mindset).



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Our group motto is 'no feedback, no flow.' The combination of playful learning, appropriate feedback, and a growth mindset promotes a lifelong learning and joyful attitude towards life.

What feedback looks like in a playful classroom

Feedback takes on various visible forms: it is linked to the decisions that students' make throughout the learning process. In this section, we describe the kind of feedback students offer that suggests a playful classroom. The student actions presented below are feedback cues; in other words, the kind of feedback that teachers get from students (e.g., they are trying, they are smiling) that suggests a playful learning experience. These feedback cues can appear in one single activity or in different intervals depending on the objective and nature of the task.

Trying:

Trying refers to the act of attempting or engaging in an activity, task, or concept with the intent of learning or accomplishing something. In the context of playful learning, trying involves exploration, experimentation, and pushing boundaries to discover new possibilities. Students might, for instance, rearrange building blocks or create an innovative solution with various materials, colors, and resources. Feedback from educators is essential when a student is



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trying, as it supports different exploration scenarios by acknowledging effort and persistence, providing guidance, and emphasizing the value of the learning process over immediate success. However, when there is lack of feedback students may give up trying. Trying is part of a feedback loop.

Smiling

Smiling is a facial expression that conveys happiness, joy, or amusement. In the context of playful learning, smiling is an indicator of positive emotional engagement and enjoyment. When individuals are having fun and experiencing a sense of playfulness while learning, they are more likely to smile, which provides educators visible feedback on the task at hand and can be understood as evidence of a positive learning environment. Moreover, feedback that acknowledges and celebrates smiles during playful learning reinforces the connection between enjoyment and effective learning.

Questioning

When students are questioning, it encourages learners to explore concepts



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from different angles and perspectives, challenge assumptions, and make connections. Playful learning environments that promote a culture of open-ended inquiry empower students to ask "why," "how," and "what if" questions as well as how to improve their learning. Thus, feedback is linked to questioning since it empowers learners' curiosity and guides them toward investigating answers and expanding their knowledge. Questioning is also a pathway to feedback, as it is a way students can seek information about their process.

Understanding:

Understanding is cultivated through active engagement, exploration, and meaningful connections that can all be fostered through play. In meaningful playful learning, understanding and feedback go hand-in-hand. Teachers can solicit feedback from the students - such as asking for explanations, relevant examples, or prompting reflection - that can reinforce and signal content understanding. This helps learners build a deeper and more meaningful relationship with the subject matter. Understanding can be



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seen through facial expressions of joy in getting the answer right. A “eureka moment” – the instance when confusion or curiosity turns into understanding - could be one of the best ways to identify understanding. It becomes evident when a look of intense concentration shifts into a wide-eyed look of surprise or joy.

Open Communication:

Open communication involves the exchange of thoughts, ideas, and feelings in an environment that values honesty, respect, and collaboration. In the context of playful learning, open communication creates a safe and inclusive space where learners feel comfortable expressing themselves, sharing their insights, providing and receiving feedback, and collaborating with peers and educators. This type of communication encourages active participation, fosters a sense of belonging, and supports the co-creation of knowledge. Feedback that emphasizes open communication looks like the inclusion of diverse perspectives, active dialogue, and listening and engaging with others' viewpoints in the learning process.



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What feedback feels like in a playful classroom

Feedback evokes a myriad of feelings, which can connect to specific emotions or states within physical and mental responses. In our practice, students have expressed that feedback feels like vulnerability, confidence, validation, progress, clarity and trust. Let's see what each of these imply.

Vulnerability:

Vulnerability is the state of being open and emotionally exposed, often involving a willingness to share thoughts, feelings, and experiences, even if they involve uncertainty or discomfort. In the context of playful learning, feedback can come from the teacher, peers, or the experience itself. For instance, when students lose or get an answer wrong, they feel exposed. When an activity requires getting out of their comfort zone (e.g. creating, improvising, acting, drawing, dancing, etc.), they also feel exposed. Thus, vulnerability is linked to a willingness to take risks, make mistakes, and explore new ideas without fear of judgment. Playful environments encourage learners to embrace their vulnerability as a way to foster creativity, adaptability, and personal growth. Because feedback may place students in a state of vulnerability, it is



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crucial that it be provided in a way that helps learners feel safe and understood, promoting a positive and supportive learning atmosphere.

Confidence:

Feeling confident has to do with a learner's sense of self-assurance and belief in their abilities. In playful learning, confidence is nurtured through opportunities to engage in challenges, problem-solving, and creative expression where learners are given a chance to build confidence by trying new things, making discoveries, and achieving small successes. When feedback highlights and reinforces these achievements, it helps boost our learners' confidence, motivating them to take on more complex tasks and challenges.

Validation:

Students feel validated when others recognize and acknowledge their thoughts, feelings, or experiences, conveying that they are valued and important. In the context of playful learning, validation is crucial for creating a positive and supportive learning environment. Learners seek validation for their efforts,



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ideas, and progress, which encourages them to stay engaged and motivated. Feedback that validates learners' contributions, even if they are still in the process of learning, helps build a sense of self-worth and encourages continued active participation.

Progress:

Progress is often associated with a positive emotional state that arises, such as when learners perceive that they are making meaningful advances or improvements toward achieving something important to them. In playful learning, progress is about celebrating small victories, incremental achievements, and the journey of learning itself. Playful learning experiences often emphasize growth over perfection, encouraging learners to focus on their development rather than solely on final outcomes. Feedback that acknowledges and highlights progress reinforces the value of continuous learning, motivating learners to persevere and keep exploring.

Clarity:

Feeling clarity refers to a state of mental or emotional clearness, understanding, and



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focus. When students feel this way, their thoughts are organized, their intentions are well-defined, and they have a strong sense of direction. This mental state often leads to increased confidence and decisiveness. In playful learning, clarity is important for effective communication and comprehension. Playful learning environments strive to present concepts, instructions, and tasks in a clear and engaging manner to promote understanding and engagement. Moreover, feedback that offers clear explanations, examples, and guidance supports learners in making sense of complex topics, reducing confusion, and facilitating meaningful interactions with the subject matter.

Trust:

Trust is the reliance or confidence in the integrity, abilities, and intentions of others. Learners who feel trusted feel secure, comfortable, and confident. In playful learning, trust is fundamental in establishing positive relationships. When learners feel that their educators trust and support them, they are more likely to engage actively, take risks, and embrace challenges. Feedback



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that demonstrates trust by respecting learners' autonomy, providing constructive guidance, and acknowledging their efforts fosters a sense of partnership and collaboration, enhancing the overall learning experience.

Ideas to provide playful feedback

Using avatars

Integrating avatars into rubrics and checklists cultivates a playful and relatable dimension to what is often presented as a plain document. Featuring personalized avatars can inspire student-teacher bonds as they provide a visual representation of the teacher that students can relate to. This is a simple way to inject an element of fun in the assessment and task accomplishment experiences.

DIFFERENTIATION CASE PRESENTATION				
CRITERIA	EXPECTED OUTCOMES	EVIDENT	EVIDENT MISSING	COMMENTS
The solutions proposed reflect an active learning approach.				Infographics, virtual room - asking questions, I had here you used active learning strategies in this example, as well as giving examples of visual aids and role-play.
At least one new differentiation strategy has been proposed.				Round table, small group tables, small groups seating. - There are useful suggestions about how to organize the classroom and set a meaningful education space. Each aspect was addressed

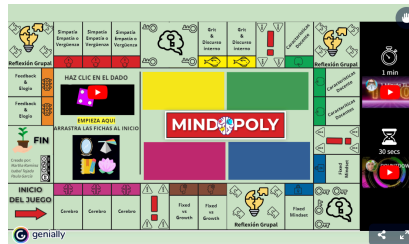
In this example, Jimena designed a website to provide feedback on her students' process of creating a Learning Portfolio. She included her avatar and some Gifs. This visually engaging web page format, plus the avatar, motivated students to carefully read the information related to what they did well, and on what they could improve in their portfolio creation.



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Using a game to wrap up a course
Creating a game to evaluate student understanding and provide feedback is a fun way to wrap up a course. In this example, Martha, Isabel and Paula designed an online “Mindopoly” game for a course on Growth Mindset. The game had a hidden answer key that only the assigned "Answer Banker" knew how to find (by clicking on the plant icon). This added an element of intrigue.



Using agile feedback practices to self-direct work in engineering students

Applying a systematic weekly feedback process for working prototypes is an engaging way to involve teachers and students in any design process. In this example, Fabian uses an agile retrospective ceremony, which opens the conversation around design errors without fear of punishment. Although the teacher provides some technical guidance to correct design flaws, it is the students who autonomously evaluate, question and adjust their own designs (using retrospective ceremonies) so that the delivery of the



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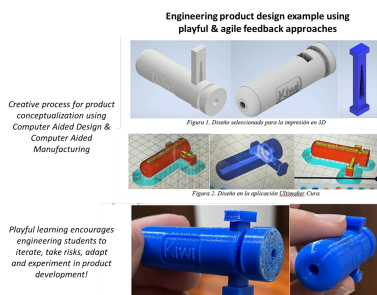
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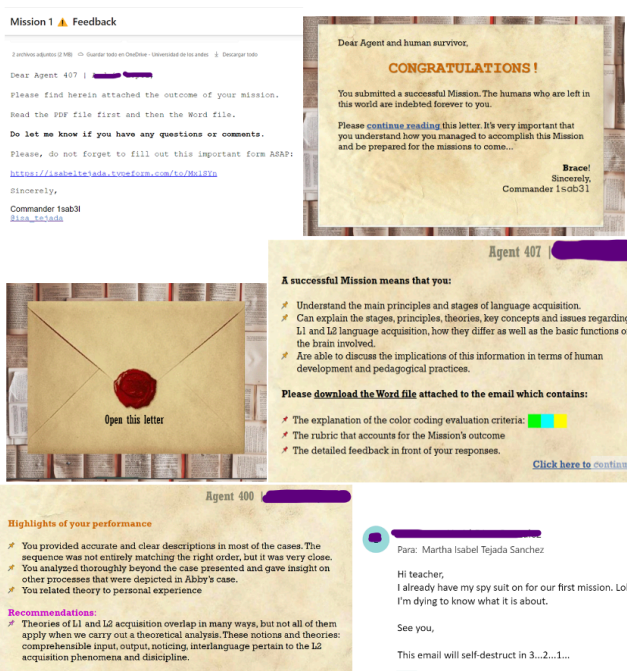
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final product meets the requirements of the final product users.



Role-playing through mission quests & combining them with rubrics

In this activity, Isabel proposes a role-playing task with a mission. Students take the role of secret agents while the teacher fulfills the role of commander. After completing their mission, students (agents) are given a secret letter with their feedback. They receive highlights on their performance and a rubric in a pdf file. In this task, Isabel's students also responded to an email in a playful way.



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Based on our field experience, we've confirmed that playful feedback combined with good reflection habits enhanced performance in our students ([Anseel, 2009](#)), and allowed them to learn from both their successes and failures ([Ellis, 2014](#)). Reflection, on an individual, peer to peer, or group basis, is important because it helps us squeeze more value from how the playful experience *looks like* and *feels like*.

To learn effectively, it is necessary that the environment (depending on the case, parents, school, university... or even a video game) provides the student with feedback as quickly and accurately as possible, allowing the student to reflect on his/her error as part of the learning process.

According to learning theory, grading is a reward (or punishment) signal. However, one of its peculiarities is that it is completely devoid of precision, and by means of a number or a letter, different sources of error are summarized without any distinction. Hence, the grade does not provide enough information, since by itself it does not allow one to know *why* one made a mistake or *how* one can correct oneself ([Dehaene, 2019](#)).

The design of playful learning classes (using play/game strategies) allows the learner to make visible and understand, within a safe environment, *what kinds* of mistakes or successes occurred, *why* they emerged, and *how* the learnings from the experience can be incorporated in a next time. As a result of this, constructive feedback and non-punitive evaluation processes can be



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developed that lead to joyful, actively engaging, iterative, socially interactive, and meaningful growth learning experiences.

Want to see how and why the challenge completes the playful indicators triad for playful learning in Higher Ed? Stay tuned for our next post!

About the authors

Martha Ramirez is a teacher educator, academic consultant, author, and researcher specialized in flipped learning and growth mindset.

Throughout her teaching career, she has sought ways to teach outside the box: playful learning has been one of the key approaches she uses in every teaching scenario she can.

Fabián Dulcé is an edupreneur and a highly curious lifelong learner. Passionate about making things different in education; enjoys integrating game and lean-agile thinking to create innovative learning experiences. Since 2013 he's been working in varied educational institutions in Colombia as a trainer, lecturer, researcher and consultant.

Isabel Tejada is a Professor at the School of Education at Los Andes University (Bogotá). She's a passionate and playful life-long learner, growth mindsetter, and intercultural educator.

Paula García teaches future teachers at the School of Education at Universidad de Los Andes, Colombia. She has devoted her life to learning through a number of approaches, and found playful learning one of the most



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challenging ways to make sure learning happens and stays.

Jimena Alviar is a proud and passionate English teacher who has devoted more than 10 years to exploring engaging and playful learning scenarios. Her curious and committed teaching spirit has allowed her to apply and navigate different teaching approaches with a varied range of students from preschool to higher education.



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March 18, 2024

Aprender jugando en educación superior: el proceso fluye con retroalimentación

Martha Ramirez, Fabián Dulcé,
Isabel Tejada, Paula García, Jimena
Alviar

Introducción

¡Bienvenidos al cuarto post de nuestra miniserie sobre el Aprendizaje a Través del Juego en contextos de Educación Superior! Puedes encontrar una versión en inglés de este post [aquí](#).

Esta entrada del blog se enfoca en cómo se ve la *retroalimentación* desde las perspectivas del estudiante y del profesor, cuando actúa como un indicador clave para desarrollar clases a través del juego. La primera perspectiva se refiere a cómo los estudiantes ‘pasan por su cuerpo’ las experiencias de aprendizaje, y la segunda aborda los elementos de retroalimentación que los educadores utilizan para aprender a través del juego.

Entendiendo la retroalimentación

Creemos que una de las condiciones para incluir un enfoque de aprendizaje a través del juego en cualquier contexto educativo es crear un entorno en el que los estudiantes se sientan cómodos asumiendo riesgos y probando cosas



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nuevas. Este entorno se alinea con los principios de una mentalidad de crecimiento, ya que ambos enfatizan sobre el valor del esfuerzo y la creencia en el potencial para la mejora. Asimismo, una retroalimentación efectiva se alinea con los principios de una mentalidad de crecimiento al centrarse en el esfuerzo, las estrategias y la mejora continua. Cuando los estudiantes reciben una retroalimentación constructiva que resalta su progreso y ofrece orientación para un mayor desarrollo, es más probable que vean los desafíos como oportunidades de crecimiento.

El aprendizaje a través del juego anima a los estudiantes a adaptarse, experimentar e iterar. La retroalimentación se enfoca en los progresos y los avances, y se diseña no para potenciar la autoestima de los estudiantes, sino para anotar y destacar sus progresos diarios, fomentar su participación y estimular su atención de una manera constructiva. Esto también implica una comprensión de los fundamentos del aprendizaje: *que todos deben esforzarse; que una respuesta siempre debe estar justificada, que es apropiado asumir el riesgo de cometer un error; y que equivocarse (y corregir los errores) es la única forma de aprender.*

También hemos encontrado que el aprendizaje a través del juego y la retroalimentación pueden tener una doble relación: por un lado, las actividades de aprendizaje a través del juego son más significativas cuando la retroalimentación forma parte de la ecuación; por otro lado, la forma en que



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se proporciona la retroalimentación puede ser 'juguetona' en sí misma.

La retroalimentación está directamente relacionada con los otros dos indicadores del aprendizaje a través del juego que hemos propuesto: cuando falta la retroalimentación, el enganche del estudiante desfallega y se instala la frustración. Aún más, la naturaleza de la retroalimentación determina el escenario para enmarcar los *desafíos*, para que sean vistos como oportunidades emocionantes para aprender y mejorar (mentalidad de crecimiento), o como amenazas para la autoestima de nuestros estudiantes (mentalidad fija).

El lema de nuestro grupo es "*sin feedback, no hay flujo*". La combinación de aprendizaje a través del juego, retroalimentación adecuada y una mentalidad decrecimiento promueve el aprendizaje permanente y una actitud alegre hacia la vida.

¿Cómo se ve la retroalimentación en un aula basada en el aprendizaje a través del juego?

La retroalimentación se visibiliza de diversas formas: está vinculada a las decisiones que toman los estudiantes a lo largo del proceso de aprendizaje. En esta sección, describimos el tipo de retroalimentación que ofrecen los estudiantes y que sugiere un espacio de aprendizaje basado en el juego. Las acciones de los estudiantes que se presentan a continuación son señales de retroalimentación; en otras palabras, es el tipo de retroalimentación que los profesores reciben por parte de los



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estudiantes (por ejemplo, se están esforzando, están sonriendo) y que sugiere una experiencia de aprendizaje a través del juego. Estas señales de retroalimentación pueden aparecer en una sola actividad o en diferentes momentos en función del objetivo y la naturaleza de la tarea.

Intentar:

Intentar se refiere al acto de emprender o involucrarse en una actividad, tarea o concepto con la intención de aprender o lograr algo. En el contexto del aprendizaje a través del juego, intentar implica la exploración, la experimentación y empujar los límites para descubrir nuevas posibilidades. Los estudiantes podrían, por ejemplo, reorganizar fichas de construcción o crear una solución innovadora con diversos materiales, colores y recursos. La retroalimentación por parte de los educadores es esencial cuando un estudiante está intentando, ya que apoya diferentes escenarios de exploración donde se reconoce el esfuerzo y la persistencia, se proporciona orientación y se hace énfasis en el valor del proceso de aprendizaje por encima del éxito inmediato. Sin embargo, cuando no hay retroalimentación, los estudiantes pueden dejar de intentar. Intentar forma parte



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de un ciclo de retroalimentación.

Sonreír

La sonrisa es una expresión facial que transmite felicidad, alegría o diversión. En el contexto del aprendizaje a través del juego, sonreír es un indicador de enganche emocional positivo y disfrute. Cuando las personas se divierten y experimentan una sensación de juego mientras aprenden, es más probable que sonrían, lo cual brinda a los educadores una retroalimentación visible sobre la tarea que están realizando y puede entenderse como evidencia de un ambiente de aprendizaje positivo. Además, la retroalimentación que reconoce y celebra las sonrisas durante el aprendizaje a través del juego refuerza la conexión entre la diversión y el aprendizaje efectivo.

Cuestionar

Cuando los estudiantes cuestionan, se los anima a explorar conceptos desde diferentes ángulos y perspectivas, a desafiar suposiciones y a establecer conexiones. Los ambientes de aprendizaje a través del juego que promueven una cultura de



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indagación abierta empoderan a los estudiantes a plantearse preguntas del tipo "¿porqué?", "¿cómo?" y "¿qué pasaría si?", así como a mejorar su aprendizaje. Así pues, la retroalimentación está vinculada al cuestionamiento, ya que empodera la curiosidad de los estudiantes y les guía hacia la investigación de respuestas y la expansión de sus conocimientos. Cuestionar es también una ruta hacia la retroalimentación, ya que es una forma en que los estudiantes pueden solicitar información sobre su proceso.

Comprender

Comprender se cultiva por medio de la participación activa, la exploración y las conexiones significativas que pueden fomentarse a través del juego. En el aprendizaje a través del juego significativo, la comprensión y la retroalimentación van de la mano. Los profesores pueden solicitar retroalimentación a los estudiantes -por ejemplo, pidiéndoles explicaciones, ejemplos pertinentes o incitándoles a la reflexión- para reforzar y señalar la comprensión de los contenidos. Esto ayuda a los estudiantes a establecer una relación más profunda y significativa con la clase.



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Comprender puede verse mediante expresiones faciales de alegría por haber acertado la respuesta. Un "momento eureka" -el momento en que la confusión o la curiosidad se convierten en entendimiento- puede ser una de las mejores formas de identificar la comprensión. Se hace evidente cuando una mirada de intensa concentración se transforma en unos ojos bien abiertos que reflejan sorpresa o alegría.

Comunicación abierta

La comunicación abierta implica el intercambio de pensamientos, ideas y sentimientos en un ambiente que valora la honestidad, el respeto y la colaboración. En el contexto del aprendizaje a través del juego, la comunicación abierta crea un espacio seguro e inclusivo en el que los estudiantes se sienten cómodos expresándose, compartiendo sus ideas, proporcionando y recibiendo retroalimentación, y colaborando con compañeros y profesores. Este tipo de comunicación estimula la participación activa, fomenta el sentido de pertenencia y favorece la co-creación de conocimiento. La retroalimentación que favorece la comunicación abierta se ve como inclusión de diversas



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perspectivas, diálogo activo, escucha y compromiso con los puntos de vista de los demás en el proceso de aprendizaje.

¿Cómo se siente la retroalimentación?

La retroalimentación evoca un sinfín de sentimientos que pueden conectar con emociones o estados específicos dentro de respuestas físicas y mentales. En nuestra práctica, los estudiantes han manifestado que la retroalimentación se siente como vulnerabilidad, seguridad, validación, progreso, claridad y confianza. Veamos qué implica cada una de ellas.

Vulnerabilidad:

La vulnerabilidad es el estado de sentirse abierto y expuesto emocionalmente, lo cual supone tenerla voluntad de compartir pensamientos, sentimientos y experiencias, aunque impliquen incertidumbre o incomodidad. En el contexto del aprendizaje a través del juego, la retroalimentación puede venir del profesor, de los compañeros o de la misma experiencia de aprendizaje. Por ejemplo, cuando los estudiantes pierden o se equivocan en una respuesta, se sienten expuestos. Cuando una actividad los lleva a salirse de su zona de confort (por ejemplo, creando, improvisando, actuando,



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dibujando, bailando, etc.), también se sienten expuestos. Así pues, la vulnerabilidad está vinculada a la voluntad de arriesgarse, cometer errores y explorar nuevas ideas sin miedo a ser juzgado. Los ambientes de aprendizaje a través del juego animan a los estudiantes a abrazar su vulnerabilidad como forma de estimular la creatividad, la adaptabilidad y el crecimiento personal. Dado que la retroalimentación puede colocar a los estudiantes en un estado de vulnerabilidad, es crucial que ésta se proporcione de una manera que los ayude a sentirse seguros y comprendidos, promoviendo un ambiente positivo de aprendizaje.

Seguridad:

Sentirse seguro tiene que ver con el grado confianza que el aprendiz tiene en sí mismo y en creer en sus capacidades. En el aprendizaje a través del juego, la seguridad se nutre de las oportunidades de enfrentarse a desafíos, resolver problemas y expresarse de forma creativa, lo que brinda a los estudiantes la oportunidad de aumentar el grado de confianza en sí mismos intentando cosas nuevas, haciendo descubrimientos y



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consiguiendo pequeños logros. Cuando la retroalimentación resalta y refuerza estos logros, ayuda a aumentar la confianza de los estudiantes, motivándoles para asumir tareas y desafíos más complejos.

Validación:

Los estudiantes se sienten validados cuando otros aceptan y reconocen pensamientos, sentimientos o experiencias, transmitiéndoles que son valiosos e importantes. En el contexto del aprendizaje a través del juego, la validación es crucial para crear un ambiente de aprendizaje positivo y de apoyo. Los estudiantes buscan la validación por sus esfuerzos, ideas y progresos, lo que les anima a seguir enganchados y motivados. La retroalimentación que valida los aportes de los estudiantes, incluso si todavía están en el desarrollo del proceso de aprendizaje, ayuda a construir la autoestima que su vez incentiva la participación activa continua.

Progreso:

El progreso suele asociarse a un estado emocional positivo que surge, por ejemplo, cuando



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los aprendices perciben que están logrando avances o mejoras significativas orientadas a la consecución de algo importante para ellos. En el aprendizaje a través del juego el progreso consiste en celebrar las pequeñas victorias, los logros incrementales y el mismo proceso de aprendizaje . Las experiencias de aprendizaje a través del juego hacen énfasis en el crecimiento por encima de la perfección, animando a los estudiantes a enfocarse en su desarrollo y no únicamente en los resultados finales. La retroalimentación que reconoce y resalta el progreso refuerza el valor del aprendizaje continuo, motivando a los estudiantes a perseverar y seguir explorando.

Claridad:

Sentir claridad se refiere a un estado de lucidez mental o emocional, comprensión y concentración. Cuando los estudiantes se sienten así, sus pensamientos están organizados, sus intenciones están bien definidas y tienen un fuerte sentido de qué dirección tomar. Este estado mental conduce a menudo a una mayor seguridad y decisión. En el aprendizaje a través del juego, la claridad es importante para una



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comunicación y comprensión efectivas. Los ambientes de aprendizaje a través del juego presentan los conceptos, las instrucciones y las tareas de forma clara y atractiva con el propósito de promover la comprensión y el enganche. Además, la retroalimentación que ofrece explicaciones claras, ejemplos y orientación, ayuda a los estudiantes a entender temas complejos, reduciendo la confusión y facilitando interacciones significativas con los contenidos.

Confianza:

La confianza es la dependencia en la integridad, las capacidades y las intenciones que tienen los demás. Los estudiantes que sienten confianza se sienten seguros, cómodos y confiados. En el aprendizaje a través del juego, la confianza es fundamental para establecer relaciones positivas. Cuando los estudiantes sienten que sus educadores confían en ellos y les apoyan, es más probable que participen activamente, se arriesguen y acepten desafíos. La retroalimentación que demuestra confianza respetando la autonomía de los estudiantes, proporcionando una



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orientación constructiva y reconociendo sus esfuerzos fomenta un sentido de asociación y colaboración, mejorando la experiencia general de aprendizaje.

Ideas para retroalimentar a través del juego

Uso de avatares

La integración de avatares en rúbricas y listas de control aporta una dimensión divertida y amena a lo que comúnmente se presenta como un simple documento plano. Los avatares personalizados pueden construir vínculos profesor-estudiante, ya que ofrecen una representación visual del profesor con la que los estudiantes pueden identificarse. Es una forma sencilla de inyectar un elemento de diversión en las experiencias de evaluación y realización de tareas.

DIFFERENTIATION CASE PRESENTATION				
CRITERIA	EVIDENCE	EVIDENCE	EVIDENCE	COMMENTS
The solutions proposed reflect an active learning approach.				Infographics, virtual room - asking questions, I liked how you used active learning strategies in this example, as well as giving examples of visual aids and role-play.
At least one new differentiation strategy has been proposed.				Round table, small group tables, small groups seating. • There are useful suggestions about how to organize the classroom and set a meaningful education space. Each aspect was addressed

En este ejemplo, Jimena diseñó un sitio web para proporcionar retroalimentación sobre el proceso de creación de un portafolio de aprendizajes de sus estudiantes. Ella incluyó su avatar y algunos Gifs. Este formato de página web visualmente atractivo, más el avatar, motivó a los estudiantes a leer atentamente la información relacionada con lo que habían hecho bien, y sobre lo que



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podían mejorar en la creación de su portafolio.



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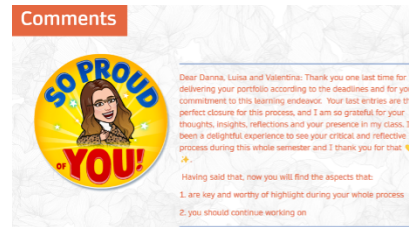
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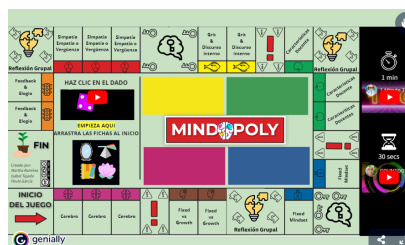
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Utilizar un juego para cerrar un curso

Crear un juego para evaluar la comprensión de los estudiantes y proporcionarles retroalimentación es una forma divertida de cerrar un curso. En este ejemplo, Martha, Isabel y Paula diseñaron un juego en línea llamado "Mindopoly" para su curso sobre Mentalidad de Crecimiento. El juego tenía una llave oculta que sólo el "Guardián de las Respuestas" asignado sabía cómo encontrarla (haciendo clic en el icono de la planta). Esto añade un elemento de intriga.



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Uso de prácticas ágiles de retroalimentación para autodirigir el trabajo en estudiantes de ingeniería

Aplicar un proceso sistemático de retroalimentación semanal para el desarrollo de prototipos funcionales es una forma atractiva de integrar a profesores y estudiantes en cualquier proceso de diseño. En este ejemplo, Fabián utiliza una ceremonia retrospectiva ágil, que abre la conversación en torno a los errores de diseño sin miedo al castigo. Aunque el profesor proporciona cierta orientación técnica para corregir los fallos de diseño, son los estudiantes quienes evalúan, cuestionan y ajustan de forma autónoma sus propios diseños (mediante ceremonias de retrospectiva) de manera que la entrega del producto final cumpla los requisitos de los usuarios finales.



¿Qué consideramos que funcionó bien?

R/. Consideramos que funcionó bien el evidenciar los posibles problemas con el diseño anteriormente mostrado al momento de realizar la impresión y la rápida forma en la que se realizó un nuevo diseño para cumplir con los tiempos establecidos. Además, el prototipo obtenido cumple con los requisitos de diseño.

¿Qué consideramos que podría funcionar mejor?

R/. Lo que consideramos que podría funcionar mejor es evidenciar las cosas necesarias para que una impresión salga de la mejor forma, en una primera iteración, como la elección de material, por tanto, este debió estudiarse un poco más antes de imprimir el primer prototipo y la estructura interna que debe tener la pieza para evitar deformaciones al imprimir.

Para una próxima iteración ¿Qué cosas podríamos intentar hacer diferente para mejorar?

R/. Lo que podríamos intentar hacer diferente es que nuestro prototipo sea mucho más preciso, ya que el funcionamiento de graduar el aire es un poco inexacto en cuanto al porcentaje que se deja pasar o interrumpir.



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Juegos de rol con misiones y su combinación con rúbricas de evaluación

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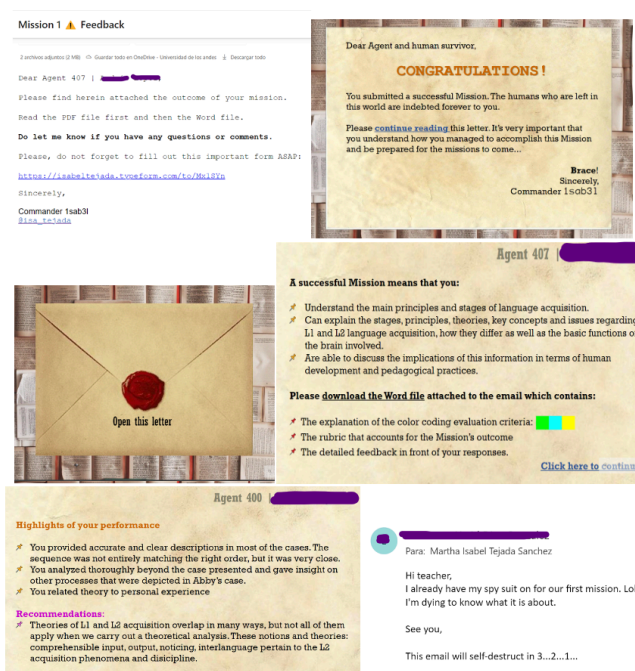
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En esta actividad, Isabel propone un juego de rol con una misión. Los estudiantes asumen el rol de agentes secretos, mientras que el profesor desempeña el rol de comandante. Tras completar su misión, los estudiantes (agentes) reciben una carta secreta con su retroalimentación. Reciben información sobre los aspectos destacados de su desempeño y una rúbrica en un archivo en pdf. En esta tarea, los estudiantes de Isabel también respondieron a un correo electrónico de forma juguetona.



Con base en nuestra experiencia de campo, hemos confirmado que la retroalimentación a través del juego combinada con buenos hábitos de reflexión mejoró el rendimiento de nuestros estudiantes (Anseel, 2009), y les permitió aprender tanto de sus éxitos como de sus fracasos (Ellis, 2014). La reflexión, tanto individual, entre pares, como en grupo, es importante porque nos ayuda a imprimir



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más valor al aprendizaje a partir de *cómo se ve y cómo se siente* la experiencia a través del juego.

Para aprender de forma efectiva, es necesario que el entorno (según sea el caso: padres, colegio, universidad... o incluso un videojuego) proporcione al estudiante una retroalimentación lo más rápida y precisa como sea posible, que le permita reflexionar sobre su error como parte del proceso de aprendizaje.

De acuerdo con la teoría del aprendizaje, la calificación es una señal de recompensa (o castigo). Sin embargo, una de sus peculiaridades es que carece por completo de precisión y, mediante un número o una letra, se resumen las distintas fuentes de error sin distinción alguna. De ahí que la calificación no aporta suficiente información, ya que por sí sola no permite saber por qué se ha cometido un error ni cómo se puede corregir ([Dehaene, 2019](#)).

El diseño de clases basadas en el aprendizaje a través del juego (utilizando estrategias de juegos) permite al estudiante hacer visibles y comprender, dentro de un entorno seguro, *qué* tipo de errores o aciertos ocurrieron, *por qué* emergieron, y *cómo* se pueden incorporar los aprendizajes de la experiencia en una próxima oportunidad. Como resultado, se pueden desarrollar procesos de retroalimentación constructiva y de evaluación no punitiva que conduzcan a experiencias de aprendizaje alegres, iterativas, con involucramiento activo, socialmente interactivas y significativas.



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¿Quieres ver cómo y por qué el desafío completa la tríada de indicadores lúdicos para el Aprendizaje a Través del Juego en contextos de Educación Superior? ¡Permanece atento a nuestra próxima publicación!

Sobre los autores

Martha Ramírez es formadora de docentes, consultora académica e investigadora especializada en Flipped Learning y mentalidad de crecimiento. A lo largo de su carrera docente, ha buscado formas de enseñar fuera de la caja: el aprendizaje basado en juegos ha sido uno de los enfoques clave que utiliza en todos los escenarios de enseñanza que puede.

Fabián Dulcé es un edu-emprendedor y un aprendiz permanente muy curioso. Apasionado por hacer las cosas diferentes en la educación; disfruta integrando el juego y el pensamiento lean-agile para crear experiencias de aprendizaje innovadoras. Desde 2013 ha trabajado en diversas instituciones educativas de Colombia como formador, conferencista, investigador y consultor.

Isabel Tejada es profesora en la Facultad de Educación de la Universidad de Los Andes (Bogotá). Es una educadora intercultural y aprendiz permanente de la vida, apasionada por el aprendizaje a través del juego y la mentalidad de crecimiento.

Paula García enseña a futuros maestros en la Facultad de Educación de la Universidad de Los Andes, Colombia. Ha dedicado su vida al aprendizaje a



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través de una serie de enfoques y descubrió que el aprendizaje lúdico es una de las formas más desafiantes de asegurarse de que el aprendizaje suceda y se mantenga.

Jimena Alviar es una profesora de inglés orgullosa y apasionada que ha dedicado más de 10 años a explorar escenarios de aprendizaje atractivos y divertidos. Su espíritu de enseñanza curioso y comprometido le ha permitido aplicar y navegar diferentes enfoques de enseñanza con una amplia gama de estudiantes desde preescolar hasta educación superior.



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June 18, 2024

popatplay: a final word (or two)

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This is a bittersweet post. For the past decade, popatplay has been the Pedagogy of Play research team's playground – a place for us to explore ideas, share stories, test theories, and connect with colleagues around the world who are similarly curious about playful teaching and learning. Posts have followed the trajectory of our questions, sometimes sharing what we've learned, other times putting out ideas as they emerged and evolved. The blog both shaped and was shaped by our research.

Next month, the Pedagogy of Play project will come to a close. While the blog will no longer be active, within the next few weeks all previously published posts will migrate over to the [Pedagogy of Play page](#) on the Project Zero website (it's not live now, but will be soon!). On the PoP website you can also find the fruits of our playful labor: teacher resources, teacher educator resources, and [our book](#), which is now available as a free PDF in English, Spanish, and Chinese; in print in English and Chinese; and as free audio files.

The conclusion of the research doesn't mean we've asked and answered all questions! In fact, core members of the team will continue to explore and wonder about playful learning in various contexts! If you want to stay in touch, you can find some of these folks here:



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And so, we sign off with many thanks to our guest authors, avid followers, and occasional readers. We have learned so much from you and feel grateful (and hopeful!) to have such committed practitioners advocating for the inclusion of playful teaching and learning in a variety of settings. To our friends and colleagues at the [International School of Billund](#) who have been our thought partners and participatory research collaborators since the beginning; to educators from our research sites in South Africa, Colombia, and the US; to the thousands of educators who have contributed to our thinking over the years; and, finally, to the LEGO Foundation for funding this incredibly joyful and meaningful work... thanks for the laughs, challenges, and insights. We hope our paths continue to cross!



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