

Playful Learning Practices

Five core practices and related teaching strategies that promote cultures of playful learning in classrooms and schools

Empower learners to lead their own learning

Empowering learners to lead their own learning means tipping the balance of responsibility for learning toward learners. It involves both making plans and a willingness to modify plans, as well as considering which aspects of learning might be productively turned over to students (with adult guidance).

▷ Get to know your learners

Ask learners questions about their strengths, passions, and lives outside of school so teachers can design learning experiences connected to their abilities and interests.

▷ Involve learners in decision-making

Seek learners' input into three aspects of learning: the *content* (or what they are learning), the *process* (or how they are learning), and the learning *product* (or how they show what they know).

▷ Reflect on learning with learners

Asking learners to reflect on playful learning makes their thinking visible to themselves and others, which can deepen understandings of content and learning strategies. Reflections can be formal or informal; take place before, during, or after the learning experience; completed individually or with others; and carried out in different formats.

Build a culture of collaborative learning

Playful learning is enhanced when players exchange, build on, or disagree with each other's ideas. Set up the conditions for collaborative learning so that students have opportunities to learn with and from each other.

▷ Use play to build relationships

Relationship-building does not just happen during recess or free choice time; it also happens while learning the curriculum. Review individual learning experiences to decide whether reframing them as collaborative might deepen the quality of learning.

▷ Facilitate purposeful conversations to build knowledge

Use [Project Zero thinking routines](#) and discussion protocols to provide supportive structures for learners to explore, synthesize, or dig deeper into ideas.

▷ Foster a culture of feedback

Exchanging feedback about work-in-progress with peers and adults is a particular kind of “purposeful conversation” that helps learners feel comfortable sharing emerging ideas and receiving critique.

Promote experimentation and risk-taking

Encourage a culture of exploration to develop learners' critical and creative thinking skills and to support a view of experimentation and risk-taking as important parts of the learning process.

▷ Design open-ended investigations

Open the door to playing with ideas and making unexpected discoveries and connections by engaging students in open-ended investigations for which there is no correct answer.

▷ **Encourage risk-taking as a strategy for learning**

No one learns without making mistakes, especially when trying something new. Learning through play gives learners a low-stakes way to take risks, make mistakes, and learn from them.

Encourage imaginative thinking

Give learners the chance to imagine, explore, take different perspectives, and create things that are meaningful to them and to others.

▷ **Share stories to engage and enhance learning**

Encourage learners to listen to and tell stories to explore ideas and share personal experiences.

▷ **Use role-play and pretend scenarios**

Use role-play and pretend scenarios to help learners understand ideas and issues from different perspectives.

▷ **Provide materials and experiences that engage the senses and the body**

Cardboard boxes, rocks, shells, paperclips, and other found and natural materials invite learners to imagine, create, explore, and problem-solve. Moving parts of the body or using chants or gestures make repetition and memorization more engaging.

▷ **Ask questions that invite curiosity and imaginative thinking**

Pose questions that call for imaginative and divergent thinking. Questions with multiple answers invite students to play with ideas and open opportunities for further learning.

Welcome all emotions generated through play

Learning through play can involve a range of emotions, including feelings of enjoyment, satisfaction, and ownership, as well as frustration and even anger. Welcome and value all these emotions when facilitating playful learning experiences.

▷ **Design for joy**

Design learning experiences to create feelings of excitement, belonging, and joy by introducing novel materials or posing a puzzle or challenge.

▷ **Use play to explore complex issues**

Use play to explore complex topics, experience empathy, try on new perspectives, imagine alternative outcomes, and navigate conflict.

▷ **Support learners in working through frustration**

Support learners in working through frustration by validating their emotions and slowing things down to encouraging listening and collaborative problem-solving. The aim is not to remove the hard feelings, but to help learners stay in a productive and safe space where they can feel the emotions and still take risks to solve problems.