

# Playful Learning Practices

A pedagogy of play involves bringing play and playfulness into many aspects of school life: teaching, learning, assessment, the classroom environment, and school culture. Here are five core practices and associated teaching strategies that promote cultures of playful learning in classrooms and schools:

## Empower learners to lead their own learning

Taking playful learning seriously means tipping the balance of responsibility for learning away from you and toward the learners themselves. Consider sharing responsibility for decisions about the learning space, the daily or weekly schedule, the design of curriculum units, or the types of assessments you give students. Following the students' leads requires flexibility and a willingness to modify—and sometimes set aside—teaching plans. If you are prepared for serendipity, inviting learners to help shape parts of their education can give them a sense of ownership, autonomy, and intrinsic motivation. Of course, not all learners will bring a playful mindset or desire to take responsibility for their learning.

## Get to know your learners

- ▶ Learning is not an abstract phenomenon; it entails making sense of the world based on prior knowledge. Learning that is connected to students' lives becomes more meaningful. Such connections are easier to make if new information can be linked to already existing frameworks. To understand the strengths, knowledge, and interests that learners bring to the classroom, get to know them by observing and listening. Talk to your students about their lives and interests, keeping track of what you learn. Connect with families to understand what each learner brings to the classroom. And share about your family, interests, or tales from childhood experiences—when you share a story, there is a greater chance of getting a story from your students!

## Involve learners in decision-making

- ▶ Engaging learners in decisions about the curriculum, assessment, and classroom environment is another way to elicit their interest and investment. Students can participate in making decisions both large (what topics to study, how to assess or demonstrate that learning has taken place, and how to arrange classroom furniture and space) and small (where to sit, what words to learn, how to spell, and with whom to partner). You can think about the types of decisions and choices to turn over to students in at least three ways: the learning content or topics of study, the learning process or how the content is being learned, and the products of learning or how learners show what they know.

## Reflect on learning with learners

- ▶ When learners take the time to reflect on playful learning experiences, it makes their thinking visible to themselves and others. This can deepen learners' understanding of concepts and content and strengthen their understanding of how to learn. They can reflect on their feelings as well. This allows learners to play a bigger role in the learning process. The reflection can take many forms—it can be formal or informal; it can take place before, during, or after the learning experience; it can be completed individually or with others; and it can be carried out in different media such as writing, drawing, video, audio recording, or acting. However, the most important question is why you are asking students to reflect in the first place. What kind—and whose—learning do you want to support by asking students to reflect?

## Build a culture of collaborative learning

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. Set up the conditions for collaborative learning so that students have opportunities to learn with and from each other.

## Use play to build relationships

- ▶ Playful learning helps learners learn academic content and concepts as they develop meaningful relationships with peers. Relationship-building does not just happen during recess or free choice time; it also happens while learning the curriculum. When forming small groups, consider which learners have strengths and interests that are most likely to complement and support the learning of others. Be prepared for conflict to arise, but (if there is no safety issue) wait before intervening to see whether the learners can work it out for themselves. Remember to occasionally become a player and ask learners if it is okay to join in their play and what role they would like you to play.

## Facilitate purposeful conversations to build knowledge

- ▶ In playful and collaborative learning spaces, individuals work together to build knowledge as a group. This requires time for small group work, individual thinking, and purposeful whole group discussion. During these discussions, facilitate, document, and participate as learners set goals, imagine, reflect, ask questions and work through challenges. Use [thinking routines](#)<sup>1</sup> and discussion protocols to provide a structure that promotes knowledge-building as a group.

## Foster a culture of feedback

- ▶ Giving and receiving feedback from peers and adults about work-in-progress is a particular kind of “purposeful conversation” that can be invaluable to supporting a culture of collaborative learning. Yet exchanging feedback can also feel scary. Creating group norms and using discussion protocols or routines to look at student work can help learners feel comfortable sharing emerging ideas. Group norms facilitate children and teachers learning from and with each other by providing shared expectations for interactions and conversations. Norms like “It is okay to disagree” and “You don't have to follow the advice” can increase learners' acceptance of different perspectives while remaining open to critique.

## Promote experimentation and risk-taking

Experimentation, invention, and discovery become possible when learners are invited to find their own path to learning goals. A playful classroom provides a safe space for learners to experiment with materials and ideas, take risks, try new things, and work through frustration. Fostering a culture of exploration helps children develop critical and creative thinking skills and provides opportunities for them to see experimentation and risk-taking as important parts of the learning process.

### Design open-ended investigations

- ▶ Engaging students in open-ended investigations for which there is no correct answer opens the door to playing with ideas and making unexpected discoveries and connections. Not knowing exactly how things are going to turn out helps learners become comfortable with the unknown. When learners approach learning experiences with a playful mindset, they discover that experimenting, taking risks, and learning from mistakes are key components of learning. Try designing learning experiences that offer multiple pathways, for which neither you nor your students know the outcome. Seek out materials that inspire experimentation, e.g., balls and ramps, light and shadow, or color-mixing, and pose questions that lead to sustained inquiry. Note that “open-ended” does not mean no guidance or support; providing tools or structures like a checklist or an outline of a master plan can help children take charge and self-direct.

### Encourage risk-taking as a strategy for learning

- ▶ Learning is an iterative process. No one learns without making mistakes, especially when trying something new. All risks have potential adverse outcomes and thus require a bit of courage from the risk-taker. However, the experience of wrestling with a challenging idea or task is an especially powerful way to learn. Learning through play gives learners a low-stakes way to take risks, make mistakes, and learn from them. You might tell students that you expect to see them making mistakes and taking risks, especially when encountering new situations. Many of the practices and strategies for supporting learning through play require some degree of experimentation and risk-taking on your part (e.g., designing new lessons, inviting children to co-construct rules, or letting learners lead their learning without a predetermined outcome). In addition to offering open-ended investigations, you can normalize risk-taking, making mistakes, and “failing forward” (learning from what went wrong) by making them visible to learners and celebrating them as opportunities to learn, iterate, and try again.

### Encourage imaginative thinking

Engaging the imagination brings learners into the what if space of learning, where students take new perspectives, explore new ideas, and invent new creations. Give learners an opportunity to imagine, explore, and create things that are meaningful to them and to others. Learning can deepen when students move between different ways of expressing themselves.

## Share stories to engage and enhance learning

- ▶ Telling stories and creating narratives are a central way humans of all ages connect to, understand, and explore ideas. Across time and place, stories provide a way to share experiences and knowledge, giving meaningful frames to our lives. Encourage learners to listen to and tell stories to explore ideas and share personal experiences. You also can tell stories, for instance about how you learned a new language, or when you first needed to use algebra, or your creative friend or former student who couldn't spell but was a good writer. These stories of learning can inspire children and help them understand the process of playful learning.

## Use role-play and pretend scenarios

- ▶ Role-play and pretend scenarios enable learners to explore ideas and issues from different perspectives. They can engage learners of any age within or across lessons and units, often lightening the tone of assessment. Consider using props, costumes, and symbols to help students get into character. Create cards with roles or scenarios that can be selected or assigned. You might even get into character yourself to help students get into the role-play mood. Asking students to demonstrate what they know through role-play and pretend scenarios can put them at ease and be a valuable assessment strategy.

## Provide materials and experiences that engage the senses and the body

- ▶ Cardboard boxes, rocks, shells, and other found and natural materials give learners the opportunity to imagine, create, and explore. Tinkering and maker-centered learning encourage learners to explore the properties of materials and the designed world, to mess around with ideas, and to problem-solve. Consider introducing new smells and sounds in the classroom. Offer tools and materials that inspire inquiry, inventiveness, and creative thinking. These might include sand, water, paint or watercolor, pen and pencil, India ink, pastels, paper, charcoal, clay, wire, or loose parts. Or invite learners to use their bodies to process information, e.g., if you are studying sea creatures, ask children to pretend to be fish pushing water through their gills. Asking students to express and communicate their thinking in different media often deepens learning.

## Ask questions that invite curiosity and imaginative thinking

- ▶ Posing questions that invite imaginative and divergent thinking provokes curiosity and wonder. Open-ended questions are more likely to normalize the experience of uncertainty in life. They can be framed to suggest the possibility of imagining a different, and perhaps better—more just, humane, sustainable, or beautiful—world. Questions with multiple answers (or perhaps no definitive answer at all) invite students to play with ideas and open opportunities for further learning. Think about the difference between asking a child, “What are the phases of the moon?” and “What have you noticed about the moon?” Developing a good question can be its own inventive process that unfolds over time. Observe learners' play, conversations, and interactions to discover what they wonder about. Invite children to share their wonders with their peers. Making children's and your own questions visible in the classroom—on a “Wonder Wall,” a table, or hanging from the ceiling—reminds the group to remain curious and seek meaning.

## 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. It is important to welcome and value all of these emotions when designing and facilitating learning experiences. Because what is playful for one learner isn't necessarily playful for all learners, strive to provide more than one way for students to learn playfully.

### Design for joy

- ▶ There are many ways to design learning experiences to create feelings of excitement, belonging, joy, and pride. You can introduce novel materials, pose a puzzle or challenge, redesign the physical environment, set up a game or team competition, or invite students to do any of these. The beginning of a lesson or unit is often a good time to engage students in playful learning. Try introducing a lesson without words, putting a riddle on the wall, or setting up your classroom as a courtroom, café, or Greek agora. Designing joyful lessons can be particularly helpful when building skills that benefit from repetition (e.g., spelling, multiplication tables, or practicing an instrument).

### Use play to explore complex issues

- ▶ Using play as a strategy to explore complex topics can lead to new insights or ways to think about the issues. At the same time, you need to be sensitive to the experiences and emotions of the learners in front of you. Perhaps the most important thing you can do is provide a safe space and climate of trust for learners to share their thoughts and feelings. Stories, hands-on materials, role-play, and pretend scenarios are all strategies that can engage learners in grappling with difficult issues and help them navigate conflict and disagreement.

### Support learners in working through frustration

- ▶ Playful learning is different from entertainment—it involves challenge, and it does not always have to be “fun.” When people care about what they are learning, they tend to work hard and push themselves. Children will often challenge themselves in play so they can reap the rewards that come from seeing what they can do. Learning through play frequently involves negotiating ideas and materials with others, which can lead to charged emotions such as failure and frustration. Learners need support and encouragement when learning becomes difficult. Bringing a sense of curiosity helps more than judgment. The goal is not to remove the hard feelings, but to help learners stay in a productive and safe space where they can experience these emotions and still take risks to solve problems.

## Notes

1. For more information about thinking routines, visit [www.pz.harvard.edu/thinking-routines](http://www.pz.harvard.edu/thinking-routines)