

An ISB Staff Meeting: The Influences on Playful Learning for Adults



Ownership, engagement, inspiration, belonging and hygge: feelings associated with learning through play, though not generally with a school staff meeting. Yet these are the words that teachers Grace Cunningham (P1), Sanne Brink Rasmuseen (Danish as an Additional Language) and Bridget Mawtus (English as an Additional Language) use to describe their experiences during ISB's January whole-staff meeting – words that indicate a playful learning experience. What were the influences and supports that allowed for or shaped this playful learning? To answer this question, this picture of practice offers a close look at the decisions that went into the planning and facilitation of this meeting. How the meeting created feelings of choice, wonder, and delight is explained. The pedagogical practices, socio-cultural influences, and environmental factors at play are examined. How the teachers experienced the workshop as a meaningful endeavor is also highlighted.



The genesis of the January staff meeting

While there are numerous opportunities for adults to gather at ISB, such as weekly grade-level team meetings and informal conversations, whole-school meetings occur only six times a year. These meetings, which take place in the evenings, involve a significant expenditure of time and resources. All 80 school employees – from teachers and administrators to cooks and janitors – participate. Per Danish law, staff is paid overtime at one and a half times regular salary for their attendance.

Head of School Camilla Fog feels that these meetings are an important part of the school culture. At the start of the school year she outlines the topics for each staff meeting. Camilla begins planning for the January meeting in mid-December, creating a preliminary agenda and getting feedback from her leadership team colleagues Sue Oates and Kathy Bilgrav. Reviewing the plans, Camilla worries that the update about the budget is “so boring.” She consults the indicators of playful learning to consider how to include more choice, delight and wonder in the meeting.

Camilla at her desk planning



Camilla is well aware that staff meetings involve very long days for teachers, many of whom will be at school for 12 hours or more. Respectful of teachers' time, she puts a great deal of thought—spending more than 15 hours preparing—into creating an experience that is engaging. She wants the meetings to be energizing and playful, and at the same time involve serious, forward-moving work.

Ultimately, Camilla crafts the following agenda:

Dinner (17:00 to 17:30)

Optional meal in the school canteen. Most staff attend this purely social gathering.

Welcome (17:30-17:35)

The formal meeting takes place in the auditorium where staff sits in assigned table groupings. Camilla provides an overview of the meeting.

PoP Workshop with Project Zero (17:35-18:10)

Visiting PZ team share ideas for creating a guidebook about PoP for the school, with a skit, and gets initial feedback on the plan

Updates (18:10-18:30)

Camilla shares important budget information and plans for school expansion. After a PowerPoint presentation questions are fielded.

Evaluating August through December Celebrations (18:30-18:50)

Working in small groups, staff provides input on whole school rituals and celebrations using Google Docs.

Reshuffling and Looping Workshop (18:50-19:30)

Staff discuss the pros and cons of: a) keeping children in the same group as they move to new grade levels (vs. mixing classes) and b) teachers looping between grades levels (vs. staying at the same grade level year after year).

Life in P3 and K3 (19:30-19:50)

Teacher presentations about what is happening in their classrooms.

Other business (19:50-20:00)

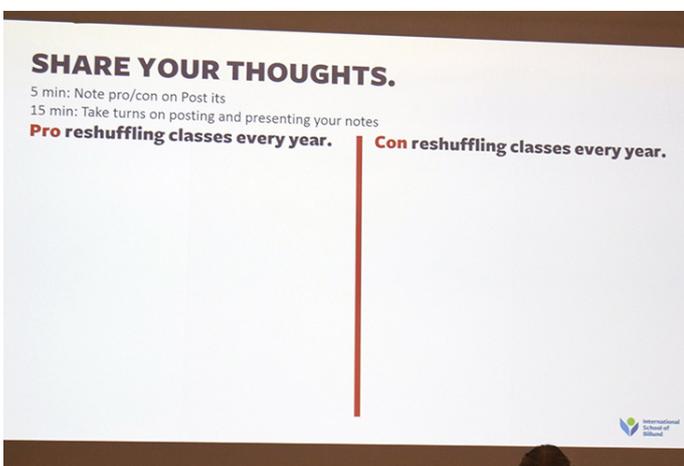
Opportunity for teachers to make announcements.

Zooming in: The Reshuffling and Looping Workshop

In the kindergarten and primary divisions at ISB there are two classes of children at each grade level. Should these cohorts stay intact or be remixed each year? Should teachers move up with their students or stay at the same grade level? These two questions are posed to the staff at the start of the Reshuffling and Looping Workshop. Camilla introduces the problem space and provides sheets for staff to record their opinions. Intentionally grouped teams of 3-7 teachers begin discussing the question about cohorts, sharing experiences from their own education and teaching, debating the pros and cons of reshuffling, listening, and occasionally laughing as someone shares a story about children they have in common. They write comments on post-its and place them on the sheets. After fifteen minutes Camilla asks the groups to turn to the question of teachers looping, again discussing and debating the pros and cons of the issue. After an additional fifteen minutes, the groups hand in their sheets for the Leadership Team to consider.



The staff discussing the reshuffling question



Slide of the small group recording sheet



Camilla collecting the small group sheets

For Grace, talking to some of her P1 and P2 colleagues during this section of the meeting involves negotiating, laughing and joking. She enjoys hearing ideas from her colleagues she has not considered before, and which, “spark a sense of curiosity and a ‘what if...’ scenario in [her] mind.” She feels curious and engaged.



Grace (gray sweater) with her P1 and P2 colleagues

Because of her role in supporting children learning English, Bridget works with multiple teams. In the same small group as Grace, she does not know her colleagues as well. Still, she feels a sense of belonging because, as she explains, “We are all educators who want the best learning experiences for children.” During the Reshuffling and Looping Workshop Bridget reports that her attention is focused and that she is creating, sharing, having ideas and negotiating.



Bridget (writing on post-it) with P1 and P2 colleagues



Sanne (in the middle of photo) with other language teachers

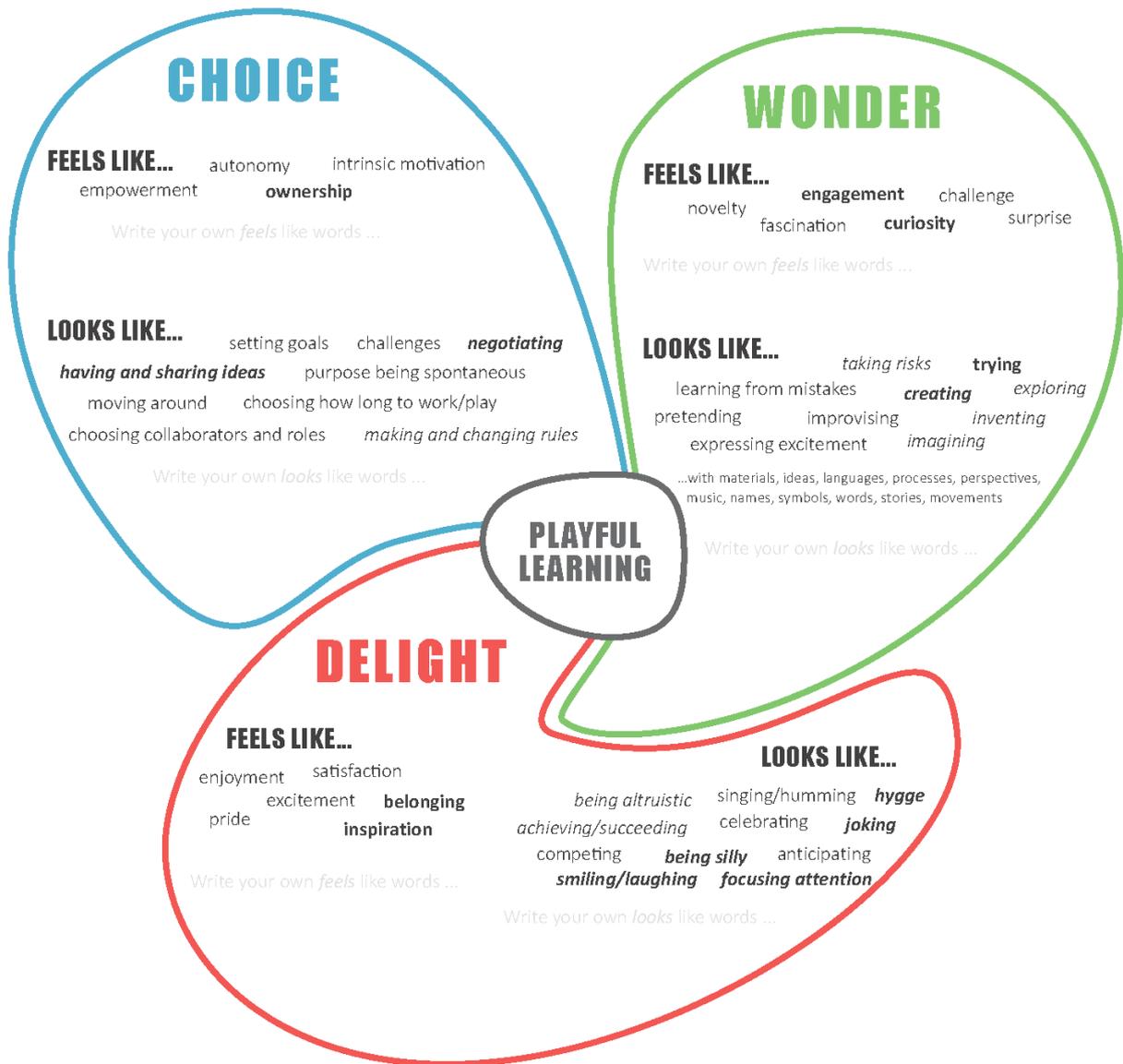


Sanne, whose small group includes some of her fellow language teachers, reports experiences similar to Grace and Bridget: having and sharing ideas, negotiating, trying, and creating. She also notes there is “laughing, joking and hygge.” She feels a sense of inspiration and ownership.

Observing the conversations, Camilla sees elements that look like playful learning. She sees staff making and changing rules, inventing, imagining, exploring while envisioning future school policies, and taking risks (for some, in expressing their opinions). She overhears colleagues helping each other articulate ideas and notes that it seems altruistic. That at 7:00pm on a work day 80 people are having a productive, forward moving conversation she sees as achieving and succeeding.

Referencing the Indicators of Playful Learning we find that Grace, Bridget and Sanne experience significant elements of choice, wonder and delight during the Reshuffling Workshop. Because all three key elements are in play, we feel confident in saying this section of the staff meeting involves learning through play.

Indicators of Playful Learning



Indicators of Playful Learning: Grace, Bridget and Sanne's reports bolded and Camilla's observations italicized.

So what conditions supported this learning through play? What are the factors or influences that enabled this playful learning experience?

Pedagogical practices¹

When asked about the influences that made possible their feelings of ownership, curiosity, engagement, inspiration and belonging, all three teachers name elements of the workshop structure and some specific pedagogical practices. Grace credits, “Clear directions and resources [the sheets with directions; post-its] to do the task,” explaining, “I felt well prepared and equipped.” Regarding the directions, Bridget adds that having an “open question” and “asking us to look at both sides of the issue” were important. She also feels that the intentional, team-based small groups allowed her and her colleagues to reference shared experiences and common children to ground conversations. Sanne concurs that it is important to work in small groups where it is easy to share ideas. She adds that the pro/con format directed staff to consider both sides of the issue. Sanne also mentions that having a big chunk of time highlighted the conversation’s importance.

1 Here and throughout align terminology with emerging model

Socio-cultural influences

The three teachers also name social and cultural influences that support their playful learning. Grace cites sitting with her team, “the people I feel most comfortable with and have built up a rapport” with, as vital. She notes the team has members from the UK, Singapore, the US and Denmark and that, “We respect and appreciate the different experiences each of us brings to the conversation.” A sense of respect, trust and a belief that their ideas will be listened to by the Leadership Team are mentioned by Grace, Bridget and Sanne. Grace notes that these sentiments are “built up” over time. The ISB school culture, and the relationships that are a part of it, are products of years of interaction. At the same time, there are interactions that occur earlier in the staff meeting that influence the teachers’ experience, setting the mood for the Reshuffling and Looping Workshop.

The expectations about staff meetings are also built up over time. In the staff meetings Camilla works to highlight staff successes, and is careful to always end meetings on time and on an upbeat topic (so staff don’t leave the meeting sad or upset). She thinks carefully about what information to share (and what can be shared instead in an email) and how to keep the meetings a “two-way street.” For Grace, having the whole school at the meeting (including the entire Leadership Team) creates a sense that, “We are all in this together.”

The mood for the Reshuffling and Looping Workshop begins to be set at dinner. This dinner is exclusively a social affair. For Bridget, having dinner with colleagues before the meeting begins creates a sense of hygge. Moving from the cafeteria to the auditorium signals the start of business. Grace mentions she has never been in school where leaders have shared information about the budget and feels sharing this information signals that teachers are taken seriously. Sanne adds that a colleague shared some candy, a small gesture that engenders a sense of hygge. In sum, when the teachers begin to talk about reshuffling versus constant groups they feel safe and are primed to be engaged.

Environmental influences

Learning takes place in physical spaces (even when one is online) and so it is important to mention the environmental influences support the teachers' playful learning. The staff meeting is held in the school's auditorium, a beautiful space with high ceilings and skylights. Camilla feels the room's high ceilings invite "free thinking", and that since it is a common space all should feel welcomed. Bridget feels the room is comfortable and appreciates it is easy to hear. Grace appreciates that the "room is beautiful" and feels it is a comfortable place to work. Of course, one can learn (and learn playfully) in a range of environments. Still, the aesthetic impact of a space should not be discounted.



A final influence: A meaningful endeavor

John Dewey (1910) explained how play alone is ultimately inadequate for the child who requires meaningful activities to sustain interest. What is true for children is certainly true for adults, and while it is nice to have an enjoyable staff meeting, what engages Grace, Bridget and Sanne during the Reshuffling and Looping Workshop is that the activity is meaningful endeavor.

The questions of reshuffling and looping involve real issues with important consequences. Sanne explains that, “We are potentially creating new procedures for the school.” Bridget, who was born in South Africa and educated in part in the UK, feels the nature of the conversation is “very Danish” in that “we were not looking for answers but for different perspectives.” She feels the staff’s ideas will be listened to. She explains that “Even if you disagree with the outcome, it is good to be included—everyone has voice. It is a level playing field.”

This belief that one will be listened to does not exist in isolation. It is built up over time. Sanne links her expectation that the input given in the workshop is important to experience in other school meetings where members of the Leadership Team, “Listen to teachers’ ideas as equals. They want to know what we think.”

Creating a playful learning experience for 80 people is no small task. Of course there are other influences on Grace, Bridget and Sanne’s experiences in the staff meeting: their personalities, cultural backgrounds and whether or not they had a good night sleep. And the attention Camilla pays to choice, wonder and delight in pursuit of learning seems to pay off in a meaningful learning experience for the staff.