

Using Play to Explore Complex Issues

Exploring difficult topics through play

Using play as a strategy to explore difficult or sensitive topics, such as slavery, war, or poverty, can lead to unexpected insights or novel ways to think about those problems; it can also foster empathy and collaboration. We want learners to be flexible and creative when confronted with difficult problems. At the same time, these topics can lead to strong feelings like sadness and anger or generate misunderstandings. Supporting playful learning in these situations does not mean trivializing or taking lightly the circumstances, emotions, or people involved. Play provides a safe way to try out new behaviors and ideas.

Steps

- 1. Identify the Topic:** Complex current events or topics such as racism, climate change, and immigration can arise either from curriculum requirements or from the learners in front of you. How do you decide which topics to address and/or how to approach them?
 - ▽ First, and most important, is to create a climate of trust and provide a safe space for learners to share their thoughts and feelings.
 - ▽ Next, consider your own comfort level with the issue. Is there content that you would consider off-limits for play (e.g., a “gas chamber” game)? If some topics seem too sensitive, consider exploring historic or fictional, rather than current, events or experiences. You can also give students a choice regarding focus.
 - ▽ Finally, invite the perspectives of families and school leaders to generate buy-in upfront. Clarify who makes the final decision about moving forward.
- 2. Explore Different Perspectives:** Invite learners to consider multiple perspectives on the topic you’re studying through storytelling, books, interviewing each other or community members, role-play or pretend scenarios, or expressing thoughts and feelings in different media. Such perspective-taking fosters empathy and understanding of diverse points of view. Students might even take on the perspective of a non-human element of an issue or event (a river, a polar bear, the rain, etc.). Ask students to use their senses to enrich their experience.
- 3. Imagine Different Outcomes:** Ask students to imagine different outcomes for historic or current events. Students might pretend they’re scientists or policymakers, tasked with developing a five-year plan to solve an environmental or economic crisis. Or invite students to create skits with new endings for past injustices, or to explore a complex topic from different disciplinary perspectives (e.g., political, economic, and biological) and share new insights from that perspective. Or ask students to tell or act out a story about overcoming a challenge, or create a “choose-your-own adventure” with alternative endings.
- 4. Share Learning:** Give students a choice of how to share what they have learned with a meaningful audience, such as their peers, families, or community members. Ask for their ideas about assessment criteria for their products or presentations.
- 5. Reflect on Learning:** Use the Project Zero thinking routine, [“I used to think... Now I think...”](#) (or tweak it to say, “I used to feel... now I feel...”) for students to reflect on and share with others what they learned from this experience. What new questions have emerged? Help students understand that complex issues will continue to be complex.



Tips for Using This Tool

- ▶ Although play can be a helpful resource for accepting difficult emotions and experiences, this does not mean “anything goes.” Raising sensitive topics can trigger strong emotional reactions for children with a history of trauma. Pay close attention to the experiences and emotions of the learners in front of you. With young children, notice what they are doing and talking about on the playground and during free play or transition times.
- ▶ Take special care when asking children to engage in role-play or pretend scenarios. In particular, do not ask children who have suffered trauma to play the roles of oppressors.
- ▶ With older children, sensitive topics may show up in conversation with you or with peers. Within a complex issue, give older learners a choice of topics, when possible, and options for how to explore and represent their ideas.
- ▶ Using this tool requires courage. While we recommend collaborating with colleagues when using any of the PoP tools, collaboration is especially important with this tool. Talk to your colleagues, school leaders, families, and perhaps the students themselves to get their perspectives, especially if you teach learners with backgrounds different from yours.
- ▶ For more information about the connection between play and children’s ability to respond to challenges, see learningthroughplay.com/explore-the-research/coping-through-play

More Than One Way

- ▶ For Step 2 (Explore Different Perspectives), see Project Zero perspective-taking routines such as [Circle of Viewpoints](#); [Step In - Step Out - Step Back](#); [Stories](#); and the creativity routine, [Color, Symbol, Image](#). See www.pz.harvard.edu/thinking-routines
 - ▽ Another option is to ask learners to “try on” the perspectives of Edward DeBono’s Thinking Hats (facts and information, emotions, process, creativity/new ideas, benefits, and cautions). See www.pinterest.com/pin/391531761346516002/
- ▶ For Step 3 (Imagine Different Outcomes), see the Inspiring Agents of Change tools, [Exploring](#) and [Exploding Systems with Human Machines](#), which help students understand systems and how to disrupt them. See also Project Zero’s [Imagine If...](#) or [Think, Feel, Care](#) thinking routines at www.pz.harvard.edu/resources
- ▶ The JusticexDesign (JxD) website includes resources that support learners in exploring the complexities of design, representation, power, and participation. JxD is based on three principles: Design is not neutral; power is multidimensional; and participation is constructed. See sites.google.com/justicexdesign.org/project/home

Notes

1. **I used to think... Now I think...** is a thinking routine developed by Project Zero. Available at: www.pz.harvard.edu/resources/i-used-to-think-now-i-think