

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 toward learners. Look for opportunities to turn important aspects of learning over to students and support them in this process. Following students' lead requires flexibility and a willingness to modify teaching plans.

▷ **Get to know the learners in front of you**

Learning is more playful when connected and relevant to students' lives. 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—students like hearing about their teacher's background!

▷ **Involve learners in decision-making**

Students can participate in making decisions both large (e.g., what topics to study, how to assess learning, how to arrange furniture and space) and small (e.g., where to sit, what words to spell, with whom to partner). The types of choices you might offer them can relate to 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**

Take time to reflect on playful learning experiences with students. Reflection can make visible the learning that has taken place, strengthen learners' understanding of how to learn, and lead to deeper exploration of ideas and content. When learners better understand how they are learning, they become equipped to co-construct and/or lead 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- or audio-recording, or acting.

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. Design for play within the curriculum (not just during recess or choice time) so learners can build relationships around meaningful content and concepts. When forming groups, consider which learners have strengths and interests that are most likely to complement and support the learning of others. Remember to become a player too, deepening your relationships with students by asking them to join in their play.

▷ **Facilitate purposeful conversations to build knowledge**

In classrooms that operate as playful, collaborative learning spaces, individuals work together to build knowledge as a group. This requires times for individual thinking, small group work, and purposeful whole group discussions. During these discussions, facilitate, document, and participate as learners set goals, imagine, reflect, ask questions and work through challenges. Use thinking routines¹ and discussion protocols to provide a structure that promotes knowledge-building as a group.

▷ **Foster a culture of feedback**

Feedback from peers and adults can be invaluable to the learning process, yet giving and getting feedback can be scary. Build a classroom culture in which learners give and receive kind and specific feedback. Creating group norms and using discussion routines to look at student work support a culture of feedback and can help learners feel comfortable sharing emerging ideas.

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 risk-taking and making mistakes as important parts of the learning process.

▷ **Design open-ended investigations**

Engaging students in open-ended investigations for which there is no right 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. 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**

Risk-taking is a valuable component of learning. Experimenting, testing hypotheses, and making mistakes are opportunities to iterate and try again. 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 they encounter a new situation. Celebrate moments when you or your students take a risk, perhaps with a special cheer, a round of applause, or a silly dance. Consider what language, routines, and rituals you use in your class that support a culture of risk-taking. Many of the practices and strategies for supporting learning through play require some degree of experimentation and risk-taking on your part as well—e.g., designing new lessons, inviting children to co-construct rules, or letting learners lead their learning without a predetermined outcome. This can provide an opportunity for you to normalize risk-taking and “failing forward” (learning from what went wrong) by making it visible to learners.

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, e.g., 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**

Roleplay 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. 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 wonder and curiosity. Open-ended questions are more likely to normalize the experience of uncertainty in life, and 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, roleplay, and pretend scenarios are all strategies that can engage learners in grappling with hard 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, rather than judgment, is helpful. The goal is not to remove the hard feelings, but to help learners stay in a productive and safe space where they can experience difficult emotions and still take risks to solve problems.

Notes

¹ For more information about thinking routines, visit <https://pz.harvard.edu/projects/visible-thinking>