

## Engaging Minds Through Creative Play

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Play...what is it? Why is it so important? Think about your favorite experiences as a child. Where were you? What were you doing? Were you alone or with a friend? It would be a pretty good guess that you were playing. From peekaboo to tick-tack-toe, play is a powerful way of connecting, exploring and learning.

Play provides young children with a way of investigating their ideas and testing their interactions with the world. Play encourages innovation. Friedrich Froebel, a German educator, and the creator of the concept of kindergarten, acknowledged "The play of children is not recreation; it means earnest work. Play is the purest intellectual production of the human being, in this stage ... for the whole man is visible in them, in his finest capacities, in his innermost being."

### Play is the engine of real learning

Numerous educational theorists have described the value of play in early education (Pestalozzi, 1938; Froebel, 1896; Dewey, 1938; Montessori, 1967; Vygotsky, 1978;) and it is currently supported in the contemporary scholarly work of (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997 & 2014; Roueche et al., 2003; Moyles, 2014; Frost, et al, 2012; Cleveland & Morris, 2014) and many others and observed in concepts such as child-centered teaching, project-based learning and open-ended divergent thinking.

You might say that play is foundational to the pedagogy of young children recognizing the prominence of child-centered approach to curriculum. Research on play is generally organized around four themes: Play as progress, play as fantasy, play as self, and play as power (Moyles, 2014).

Play helps students understand how to handle disappointment. When playing games, young children learn to model behaviors of caring for others, as well form mentoring relationships where they teach and share what they have learned. Further, by encouraging play in the classroom teachers can



“flip the script” stimulating the learning environment and creating learning situations which demand creative higher-order thinking and a strong sense of personal commitment and engagement (Robertson, 2015)

Theater educators have long embraced play as a part of instruction not only when teaching performance skills but also used to extend students' development of imagination and intuition. Educator Viola Spolin identified three levels of playing: (1) participation in fun and games; (2) problem solving and the development of physical and mental perceiving tools; and (3) catalytic action -to become spontaneous.

### Diminished the role of play

Today's hurried lifestyle with increased attention to student grades and school performance rankings (even at a very young age), has diminished the role of play in children's lives. Many children are scheduled from school, to ballet, to piano, to soccer practice, sometimes all in one day. These children have little opportunity for play, especially play which evolves and takes shape in creative and open-ended experiences. When children do have time for play, they are often encouraged by parents to play in sedentary and non-messy ways, sitting watching a movie or a playing video game using controller or other handheld devices such as iPad, iPod or cell phone. I watched my friends with amazement when they gave their children's Legos, stuffed animals and board games to Goodwill in order to make room for gaming systems.

As a child, my favorite memories were playing board games, card games, and outdoor games with my brothers, sisters and neighbors. Interactive, embodied and fast, games such as Kick the Can, Slap Jack and Candyland were always at the top of the list. When we grew tired of the conventional rules, we re-invented the games to make the games quicker. Using pieces and parts, timers and dice from different games we invented our own games. For me,

games were dynamic social experiences, both thoughtful and creative. These games are still with us, packed and unpacked move after move and often played as a family.

As a dance teacher and university professor, I quickly realized that when dance curricula celebrated the process of unstructured adaptive movement play, students young and old were more embodied, enthusiastic and engaged. When celebrating open-ended discovery, risk and collaboration were rewarded, I noticed that the process was increasing student confidence in the art form. This open-ended process also served to increase connections between students, even the ones that did not choose to be in dance class. Additionally, unstructured adaptive movement play supported critical process-based activities over performative formal products.

### **Young children have long engaged in play as a powerful way of learning about the world.**

Play provides a safe place for children to:

- Learn new concepts, explore new attitudes, and develop new skills.
- Develop an understanding and mastery of potentially exciting, worrisome, and/or confusing experiences in their world.
- Transform their experiences into creations that are uniquely their own.
- Build meaningful connections between their experiences at home, at school, and in the community.
- Discover more about each other, especially individuals that come from different backgrounds and cultural traditions.
- Foster independence and enhanced child's autonomy
- Increase engagement and increased recall and motivation

In the context of teaching and learning play promotes:

- Constructivist approach to classroom
- 21st Century Skills of creativity, collaboration, cooperation, creative problem solving
- The opportunity for differentiated assessment
- Promotes brain development that can improve memory over time
- Leadership and independent learning
- Opportunities for the formation of new communities

Over the past 18 years as a dance educator and certified movement analyst (CMA), movement play and improvisational dance games have provided my university, secondary, and primary school students with educationally enriching learning experiences. Participants benefit from both the independent open-ended nature and the immeasurable possibilities for creative stimulus. After playing movement games, I ask my students:

- What did you discover about yourself? About your friends? About your group?
- How did you come to understand what you were doing? Did it happen over time? Was it an innovation or happy accident? Can you define and describe it?
- How did the type of play you participated in influence the ways that you interacted with others?
- Afterward, in a seated focus group, I may ask them to share two new discoveries that they made. What did you discover about your own movement signature? About your imagination? About your inspiration? Invention?

As a university faculty and teacher of teachers, I realize the limitations of preservice teacher's capacity to see all that is going on in their classrooms and their desire to control both the classroom and instructional situation. However, classrooms are fluid dynamic places where engagement is key. They are places of imagination and innovation where ideas and energy bounce from place to place and noise equates energy. A dance student's silence may indicate uncertainty and lack of engagement.

As I watch my university students lead instruction, I take note of how they move in the classroom. I look at the ways do they support and connect with their dancers. How they share their passion, ignite inspiration and support student freedom of expression. In K-12 teacher training, playing games gives a teacher a unique perspective on their students. Play in the dance classroom can encourage dance content knowledge, academic learning and metacognition.

Open ended games allow the teacher to sit back and observe the relationships in the classroom, grants them unique opportunities to assess what the students know and can do and a relaxed method to adopt a constructivist approach to teaching. In addition to

teacher education, preparation, and organization of lessons, open ended play and games support dance composition, improvisation, analysis and reflection.

Play assists in the development of preservice teachers and curriculum development. Playing movement games and the use of open-ended improvisational strategies is a valuable tool in teacher preparation. They increase teacher exploration of different concepts and innovation thereby increasing teacher competencies in dance.

Here are some suggestions when bringing play into the dance class:

- Take an active role in facilitating children's play. Do not take control of the play away from them, instead, give them the room they need to work things through at their own level of thinking and understanding. Games take the focus off the instructor and into problem solving and discovery learning.
- Use a wide range of open-ended materials to encourage creative problem solving and academic learning
- Children can use play effectively when they are able to engage in play in creative and meaningful ways. Help children bring the compelling content from their own lives into their play where they can meaningfully work on and learn from it.
- Avoid games and activities that are highly structured, stereotyped, or promote competitive behavior.

### Conclusion

Young children learn best by trying out new ideas, experiences, and skills in ways that are personally meaningful. As you watch children play, you can learn valuable lessons about them. What they care about and understand. What they are trying to figure out, and what new input (materials, knowledge, and skills) might help further their understanding, development, and learning. In addition to creative development play in the dance classroom encourages dance content knowledge development, academic learning and metacognition. Children learn collaboration, cooperation, group responsibility, give and take, kindness and the value of supporting others. What could be more important than these characteristics?

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Child leaping



Child painting