

My office shelves are chock full of games. I scour yard sales and thrift stores looking for gems I have never seen before. Growing up in England, I spent many a rainy weekend designing outrageous Lego structures or betting pennies in card games with my family. Through play I learned to bargain with my brother and fast talk my father. Now, as a mother of three boys, aged 16 to 9, play is the way our family comes together. Unfortunately, play is often regarded as the antithesis of work and therefore not worthy of serious consideration in the higher education classroom. *I believe the exact opposite is true.* Play energizes, engages and motivates. Play exercises empathy and improves communication skills. Play is interactive and transformative. Play requires observation, teamwork and grit. Play teaches us that failing is sometimes more helpful than winning. Most importantly, play encourages critical thinking and creativity.

Creativity is vital in all areas of life – personal, academic and professional. Research shows that creative individuals are more likely to graduate, have better relationships, and are better able to handle stress, while creative teams perform better, are more efficient and cost effective. Creative thinking is frequently cited as the number one leadership competency, as creative organizations outperform less-creative competitors in profitability, revenue and growth. Innovative companies such as Apple, Lego, Pixar and Google have brought play into their workspaces to inspire employee creativity. Play can help generate innovative solutions to huge social issues too. For example, a participatory game is helping youth experience the importance of mosquito control to fight malaria, while an arcade game powered by empty plastic bottles encourages recycling. For all these reasons, I prioritize play in my teaching. Below I briefly detail some types of play I have successfully implemented in a variety of classes.

Dramatic Play: Through interactive, immersive and purposeful fun, role-play fosters empathy, the first step in creative problem solving. Participation in an old age simulation, a drunk-driving experience and a dyslexia simulation in my Creativity and Innovation classes encourages insightful discussions between students, faculty and community partners. Better understanding the experiences and emotions of the population they are designing for helps students generate more innovative solutions, whether it be advertisements or new products. When it is not physically possible to walk in the shoes of their target populations, I have successfully used Virtual Reality in the classroom to simulate different environments. In my Advertising classes, students also alternate throughout the semester between playing a brand manager (client side) and an account planner (agency side) to develop new communication campaigns. This simulation brings to life theoretical concepts such as the pitching and briefing process. Adapted from training completed while working as a brand manager for Unilever PLC, the role-play helps students grasp firsthand that bad advertising depends just as much on poor directions from the client as it does the creative abilities of the agency. I also use fantasy play techniques to address issues of accessibility, diversity and inclusion in the classroom.

Competitive Play: Tabletop games are a cheap, easy and effective way to fulfill learning objectives through play. For example, in a modified version of Pictionary, that I call Prototyptionary, my students compete to build abstract concepts from scrap materials. The fast paced and fun nature of the game helps students overcome their fear of failure and improves confidence in their prototyping skills and creative ability. Encouraging students to develop their own games is another way I introduce the concepts of play into the classroom. In one semester-long assignment, students plan and produce novel games for disadvantaged populations. They present their games at a poster session, open to all members of the Radford community. Several of the board games have won small internal grants to further their development. In another exercise, students demonstrate three learning objectives (willingness to take risks, creative thinking and grit) by planning and implementing unique ways to “gamify” aspects of their daily routines. I also use interactive multiple-player games, such as Kahoot and Jackbox, that allow hundreds of students to compete amiably with each other in real time in the classroom.

Cooperative Play: Having 100 students, in twenty teams of five, collectively complete a 1000-piece jigsaw puzzle in one class session provides a very realistic microcosm of the overall creative process, forcing students to deal with ambiguity, work as a team, observe closely and recognize that destruction is sometimes needed before development. I have also turned my classroom into an “escape room”, a physical adventure game in which the class players work together to decode materials and solve puzzles within a fixed time period. This immersive exercise is a safe and fun way to help students experience unfamiliar, high-pressure circumstances. They quickly learn to question their assumptions, think non-linearly and to look (literally) at problems from different angles, all important critical thinking skills.

Of all the benefits I see emerge from introducing play in my classroom, three stand out. First, I find play helps to foster inter-cultural understanding and collaboration. Students in teams who look very different from each other and who have come from very different backgrounds find a sense of community as the games help them identify shared values and goals. Second, I find play reaches students who do not do well with traditional teaching strategies. Some of the best ideas have emerged from play with students who are not traditionally academically strong and might otherwise disengage. Finally, I find games act as an “invisible assessment” tool, providing seamless real-time feedback to both the students and I regarding what is working and what needs improving.

I preach the gospel of play whenever I can. I’ve successfully demonstrated different ways to play at a variety of national pedagogical conferences to help faculty from a variety of disciplines adopt play-based techniques in their own classrooms. I received funding to purchase a large kit of team-building games (over 350 different activities!) and organized a training session to teach Davis College faculty how to use the games to improve their students’ team skills. I co-proposed, and received college approval for, a cross-disciplinary 3-credit play-based innovation course, affectionately titled The Innovation Playground. As faculty lead for the Makers Living Learning Community, play helps build an engaging and inclusive learning environment. I am also constantly seeking to learn new ways to incorporate play in my classroom. I have attended the Serious Play Conference, a three-day forum for educators who embrace the idea that games can revolutionize learning, and have attended several training sessions demonstrating play-based techniques to address accessibility, diversity and inclusion issues in the classroom. I also incorporate play in my service and research activities. For example, I am currently leading a project to develop a simulation that helps the mentally healthy better empathize with students who experience depression and anxiety.

Introducing creative pedagogical approaches to engage today’s learners takes courage. My play-driven approach to teaching provides a safe, fun environment in which experimentation and risk-taking are rewarded. In short, I believe play is the best path to mastery of both content knowledge and higher order thinking skills. I am honored to have been nominated for the Donald N. Dedmon Distinguished Teaching Professor Award, and hope that winning the award will encourage others to embrace play in their teaching and scholarship.

With sincere pleasure,



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