Cross-Department Play-Based Learning

To conclude our exploration of play in teaching and learning, our group planned and executed a "pop-up playdate" on Ankeny, just in front of the library. Relative to the days before, the air held a chill and the sky hung low and gray. One might think the weather inapt for the occasion–it was the last day of classes, after all–but it rather well captured the mood on campus. Students hurried, very rarely in units larger than pairs or, most often, sole individuals. Many stared down at their phones; a greater percentage connected themselves to their phones through earbuds; almost no one spontaneously looked up, saw all the colorful objects we had laid out for their unstructured use, and obviously wondered what was going on. In the first two-and-a-half hours, only a single student asked us what we were up to and why.

Chris sat back and watched all this unfold. A reluctant Julie Carter followed his lead. Erika, on the other hand, used the power of adorable dogs and her irresistible charm (i.e., throwing a frisbee directly at people without warning) to draw in what students she could. Chris drew more attention with his Knicks jacket than with his guitar playing, which at least affirms certain aspects of our campus community's collective aesthetic judgment.

Halfway through our day, we pivoted, and aggressively began trying to pull students into our play orbit. Resistance was great and mostly not futile. That said, a good number of students tried their hand at playing, mostly awkwardly and full of uncertainty that goofing around for any number of minutes had greater value for them than did working. None immediately saw a connection between the two. They expressed concerns about "doing things right" or "not being good enough" when it came to play, but most of the time when we got them participating there were tons of smiles and laughter.

We start with this anecdote by means of offering evidence for our learning. Though collected haphazardly, students who participated in the pop-up demonstrated and self-reported many of the concerns articulated in the writing and thinking that spurred this group into collaboration. Children do play less than they used to in the early years of their childhoods. Primary and secondary schools have instilled a sense of dreadful importance into their learning experiences, and they see play as a distraction or even anathema to the serious project of college. And they do not like that serious project as much as they might.

Guiding questions (initial goals underlined) and findings

<u>What is play?</u>

No one knows. Yet everyone does it. Indeed, all known animals play. Scholars seem to agree that people must freely enter into play, while they also accept its necessity for healthy growth–which raises the question about whether biological needs can be freely foregone. No discernible set of activities nor intentions seem to delimit play. If play manifests as an affect, the feeling varies widely, from person to person and within each person from play-experience to play-experience.

Whether play essentially defies definition or our largely Protestant, Anglo-European cultural values simply demonize play so thoroughgoing that we innately relegate it to the realm of inappropriate behavior by a certain age, it seems a bit beyond the remit of a team of Whitman faculty and staff to figure that out.

Why should we play?

Many reasons. Our group finds that students come to college in a defensive posture more than ever before, less curious than cautious, eager to protect a self-image rather than to challenge and cultivate a sense of self. Furthermore, their attentions have been preyed upon by pernicious social-media and technology corporations, who design products known to fracture kids' focus so effectively that the designers, themselves, refuse to let their own children use the products they foist on others. Anxiety has never been more prevalent. Some 20+% of US males at age 17 have been diagnosed with ADHD, and the known medical treatments have no discernible effect on learning outcomes over time (per a recent *New York Times* essay).

Play counteracts these–and many other–obstacles to learning. Depending on how we use it, play can lower our sense of self-importance and raise the value of a group. It can encourage people to try out others' points-of-view; it can help deactivate culturally- and contextually-induced biological defense mechanisms and orient students toward *pursuit*. It can also build rapport with a professor and foster a sense of belonging in the classroom.

How do we make that happen?

Based on our combined reading, reflections, and experiences this semester, we have formulated some preliminary conclusions.

1. Students distrust play.
2. They must be invited into playful experiences.They quickly model play behavior when done by an authority figure but do not initiate.
3. They require a helpful explanation of why play helps, both in general and in specific circumstances.
4. They require assurance that play is safe, more so for their sense of selfhood than for physical reasons, though we should attend to the physical with great care.
5. Students love to play, and learn more through play than they do through lectures and many, less playful assignments.
6. Students, nevertheless, do not play enough.

Participant Reflections

One fascinating aspect of this experience was how we interact with play in our pedagogy and discipline. For some of us, just the idea of creativity was play, integral to our teaching in the arts. For example, in music, play is a way to get students out of a rut, out of their heads, and help them explore things that are out of their comfort zone. But my play is often on a trim level and working toward an explicit larger goal. In exploring how others use play as a part of their pedagogy, my eyes opened to the idea of play *as* the end goal. That just playing around with others changed how I think about teaching. It left me open to more possibilities, looser, more willing to change and be flexible. It left me in a place where I was more able to learn and grow. (Laney)

My desire to participate in this PIG stems from my belief that play and creativity are essential in developing innovative ideas, and without an opportunity (or an understanding of how) to playfully ask questions or engage in a new or experimental process, we often remain rooted in known, familiar patterns of thinking. One of the most impactful aspects of this PIG was how we modeled playful teaching and learning within our own disciplines. I really valued the exchange of

strategies, perspectives, readings, and activities, as well as the opportunity to share personal stories from both inside and outside the classroom. Involvement with this group encouraged me to bring more low-stakes, process-oriented activities into my classes, and although I have plans to do more in the future, I was able to try out a few new strategies in both my ARTS-112 Collage in Contemporary Art and ARTS-167 Beginning Painting classes. I'm excited to continue to reflect on all that I've learned through this group, and I especially appreciated the chance to workshop ideas that I can adapt and integrate into future lessons. (Emily)

I joined the group because I am interested in the boundary between structured and unstructured play and the boundary between game play and other structured play. In philosophy and the mathematical side of economics, the notion of a game is often rigidly defined so that it can serve as a foundational concept for further inquiry (with the notable caveat that Wittgenstein famously offers "game" as a concept that can't be defined and must be given its meaning through use and relations of family resemblance, but whatever). In my teaching, when I focus on games with students I often urge them to understand games as constituted by their rules. When we think that way it follows that any deviation from the rules of a game amounts to not playing that game (perhaps playing a different one, but not that one). But when we look at the way that free play gives rise to temporary game-like structures, it is hard to see that activity as being so different from game play. Over the course of our discussions this term I grappled with the gap between strict gameplay and more casual engagement with games or use of games as a social medium. This experience will inform how I approach teaching with games this fall with the Games Learning Community and will help me better understand student gameplay that falls short of perfect adherence to rules and parasitizes other social structures to stay within the zone of fair play. (Tim)

This PIG Play Group and its marvelous participants offered a brilliant bouquet of interesting, inspiring, and deeply useful tools, readings, viewings, and teachings that I hope to incorporate into my various roles both in my work as gallery director at the Sheehan Gallery, and also in my extra curricular pedagogy like teaching comics to public school classes and volunteering for Carnegie Picture Lab, and in my own creative practice. I am very interested in Play as an instrument for community-building, as a pathway to invention, as an avenue for healing, as one of the very best ways to learn. We are fortunate to work in fields in which play is a possibility, and is sometimes assumed to be a given, though that aspect is sometimes overlooked. Sometimes Art and in particular, the Gallery setting, can be a little withholding, a little stayed, a little overly-serious. Yet we know (and have discussed on many occasions in this group and beyond), that play is a necessity and a tool through which we can evolve. Our gallery team often aims to create interactive spaces and prompts within our art displays, but through this PIG, I am that much more committed to incorporating play both in our exhibition installations, and also in our programming. I firmly believe that we can deconstruct and reimagine the ways we engage with our classes and all visitors and integrate a lot more play in the gallery space and the people we collaborate with, especially students. At every layer of liberal arts, we can infuse more play and build a larger circle of learning through games, experimentation, interaction, and exploration. I am electrified to imagine the many ways this PIG and its members will make use

of all that happened this semester and I know it will ripple out in exciting and profound ways. {Kynde}

I initially enrolled in this PIG thinking about how to bring play (but really games) into my teaching. And while we did explore some gaming topics, this PIG really helped me think about how play fosters creativity and critical thinking by allowing learners to test boundaries and create their own meaning. Authentic play creates a psychologically safe space where learners can take risks, make mistakes, and discover unexpected connections. I incorporated some play into my Library 120 class this semester but I am still struggling with ways that play might fit into one-shot library instruction sessions. I think there is the opportunity to incorporate more fun and games into those sessions but I also think that getting students to authentically play requires more trust than a one-time visit. I plan to work with other instruction librarians to develop some library games (for example generating keywords) using the game modification techniques that Tim Doyle shared. This was a wonderful opportunity to explore applying play to traditional educational structures and my work will continue! (Julie)

As the campus self-proclaimed leading expert on humor, I knew the importance of play from the inception of this PIG. Humor, as I see it, is just cognitive play. During this experience, I gave myself permission to incorporate more games (trivia, class competitions), more creativity (art projects, group art/music activities), more play (humor, word clouds) in the classroom and students responded well (most of the time). I don't think it is any surprise that I was able to coax many of my students into our playdate on Ankeny. I knew their names, they've grown to trust me, and we have fun in class. These tactics fostered community, curiosity, and (from what I've heard some of my students say recently) a sense of confidence in their understanding of course material. The times introducing play didn't work as well in the classroom mostly came down to a lack of structure and too much spontaneity for the students to handle - they quickly disengaged when they didn't see value in the activities. I have learned a lot from this experience (as eloquently outlined by everyone's comments above) and look forward to translating what I've gathered from our wonderfully thought provoking conversations into the best version of my course yet. Play isn't (and shouldn't be) the only tool for teachers, but when used with finesse, it cuts through a lot of the barriers that students put up to learning - especially the ones they don't even realize are there. Afterall, play is centered on learning useful life skills in non-threatening environments where you're allowed to make mistakes and survive to learn from them, as well as building a community where you feel safe enough to play around and take risks (see this cool study from the 80s about play in rats for more; Panksepp, 1981). (Erika)