

THE STUDIO AS PLAYGROUND

An Innovative Approach to Studio Arts

Instilling play as a state of mind where the initial mark is not a product of imitation, nor anticipation of the expected result. Rather, it is the first step in a unique journey of creativity.

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What is play? Is it just one phase of development—and then it stops? As kids process information and integrate their consciousness with awareness of themselves, they are prey to pressures of achievement. Compete, get ahead. Parents organize schedules, fill every hour with arranged activity. Soccer, dance, lessons... supervised from waking to exhausted bedtime.

In today's world those pressures tend to exclude pure play in favor of supervised, organized activity. Play is about make-believe, invention where possibilities become probabilities; where fantasies become momentary reality. It allows harmless risk-taking and promotes in-charge decision making.

Play incorporates what Elena Bodrova at Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning calls executive function. This is a critical development, as you will see. By sacrificing play experience in the developing years children reduce their ability to self-regulate. Their primary dependency on outside authority inhibits their ability to take risks and explore creativity. In the past fifty years or so we have somehow forgotten the necessity of play as we gradually conformed to changing conventions in the process of growing up. At what cost? The lack of play experience stunts psychological growth by inhibiting self-empowerment. Rather than relying on one's own ability to take charge and independently make decisions, submission to authority and supervision is learned.

The act of play(ing) is a complicated psychological state of being in the present, with the power to access infinite possibilities. As such, I suggest that learning to play (again) is a powerful tool in developing personal creativity, and thus worth exploring in the academic classroom and art studio. I believe learning to play can be achieved at any age, and that the attendant potentials of play are available to anyone who is willing to try.

Play as Creative Act

The act of playing can be a simple pastime or an intense, almost spiritual act. So-called deep play is different from playing “with rules” which is mostly about games or game playing. Deep play has intent and usually engages fantastical imagination. Stephen Nachmanovich, in his book, *Free Play*, said, “The fulcrum of transformation is mind-at-play, having nothing to gain and nothing to lose, working and playing around the limits and resistances of the tools we hold in our hands.”

This is a kind of “divine play” in the sense that there are almost no limits to the fantasy imagination. In this world anything is possible and the imagination can soar. Without this fantasy world allowing a no-limit imagination, the creative act is not possible. Almost as a definition, the creative act demands the divine play activity as entry to the world of dreams. In the dream world we are simultaneously actors, playwrights and directors. In that space between dreaming and clear consciousness, there is an awakening period. It is here that we can remember and sort out the creative ideas presented in dreaming. With some practice we can enter the state of “awakening” during the day by learning how to play again.

Play is one of the most serious activities humans can engage in though first world cultures tend to reject it as frivolous because it is “unproductive, childish and wasting of time”. By rejecting play as a fundamental learning tool for older children and our adult selves, we sacrifice an essential entrance into the world of creativity. Basically, rejecting play shuts the door to prospects of ingenious thinking and relegates rationality to one dimension. Play has infinite dimensions and opens all the doors to one’s imagination. The risk of failure enlightens new pathways, empowers discovery, and emboldens us to walk on the edge. Play is the least frivolous of human activities because it ignites our most precious powers of creativity. Serious players know this intuitively and recognize the power of play.

- WHAT IS THE CREATIVE ACT?
- IF ONE SEEKS IT, HOW DOES ONE FIND IT?
- IS ART ABOUT CREATIVITY?

Creativity might be thought of as a coloring of one's attitude to external reality.

How do we perceive external reality? Is it a subjective phenomenon? As we relate to external reality is there for most people a sense of compliance? If so, might there develop a sense of futility— as if nothing matters? A condition where one thinks of herself as a victim of fate? Carlos Castenada in *Journey to Ixtlan* refers to this acceptance of the ordinary as the phantom self. It is one who accepts the societal rule without question, is plodding, non-dreaming, fearful of playing, fooling around, ambiguity and personal growth. In contrast, Castenada's warrior personality realizes her worst conflict is with her own phantom nature— and it must be overcome.

As we consider external reality, an alternative reality might be available to some who are fundamentally reluctant to become a victim of fate. These people (Castenada's warriors) have a sense of self, a consciousness aloof from the directed and unwritten laws of family and friends. It may be necessary to break the implicit laws of community in order to develop a detached point of view. This detachment, as I will show, is a fundamental element in the creative act.

The warrior is a dreamer and explores the aboriginal depths of the subconscious. It is there we have the capacity for dreamtime where we can discover our warrior self. This is a secondary process in the sense that it is accessed through dreaming (or play).

Playing

I believe, obviously, that creativity is an essential part of playing; that is, I don't think it can occur outside of the play activity. Only in playing can one be creative. It is here the unconscious becomes conscious and paradox is accepted (but not necessarily resolved).

Another essential part of playing is ambiguity. It allows one to stand aside from oneself to observe in the dream state the essence of the warrior self and give it room to move.

Infants and small children are experts at playing. It is their only way of discovering self and their place as separate from objective reality— as well as discovering the secondary process of dreamwalking. In the act of play, outside elements can be manipulated (the act of creation) and a sense of power instilled.

For students wanting to understand and experience the creative state of mind, I would urge them to consider relearning how to play. Making art, one presumes, is by definition, a creative act. If we accept the idea of creativity as a function of play, we must learn to play. How do we relearn this skill we owned as children? We must desire it; try to remember how it felt and practice.

As one regains the ability to play, the sense of power to create is magnified and just as children experience the satisfaction of engaging in creative fantasy, the mature adult can do so as well. In fact, adults have a history to build fantasy upon, so dreamwalking can explore the secondary process in ways children cannot imagine.

Collaboration

There is another aspect of playing which I have lately explored involving collaboration. It has occurred to me that children often have imaginary partners when they don't have actual ones. These imaginary collaborators are integral to the playing experience as allies and critical observers. They often are more important than actual, physical playing partners.

For me, recent collaboration with two artists in separate and distinctly different experiences has resulted in work I believe could

not otherwise have been created. It required on all parties a willingness to let go of ego and operate on a cooperative level none of us had experienced previously. In both cases, the resultant work had the effect of stretching our individual skills. There was a melding of techniques that could only be realized through an enjoyable and fruitful playing experience.

Henry Miller, in *To Paint is to Love Again* said, “What is important about drawing is drawing—the doing it, right or wrong, good or bad, finished or unfinished. The effort, in other words.”

“For all of you, look at ordinary things until they become things of wonder. Finally, do something you can’t do...”

My experience with adult play as a tool to explore creativity is that play brings us back to our roots as children when we learned to invent and fantasize. Play taps into improvisation, collaboration, and nothing becomes something. The right brain plays with the left, and infinite possibilities exist for personal access. It develops fundamental empowerment and self-reliance. At the same time, everyday situational problems are approached with equanimity and creativity.

Some History

Until the mid-20th Century children’s play centered mostly on activity. To an adult’s eye their play might seem random and uncontrolled, and for that very reason, 30,000 school systems in America have now eliminated recess. For these school districts, play is a four-letter word as it represents unsupervised activity and is perceived as “a waste of time”.

According to Howard Chudacoff, a cultural historian at Brown University, play became focused on things (toys) in 1955 when television introduced shows like Mickey Mouse Club and toy advertisers began promoting toys like a gun called Thunder Burp. Chudacoff calls this the commercialization and co-optation of child’s play. Coincident with this date, Disneyland opened, offering a whole

new opportunity for programmed activity. In an interview with Adolph Gottlieb in 1970 he sadly pointed out, “(t)he great quantitative audience is for Hollywood and Walt Disney and I think that’s the future of art—in that direction. More and more people will get their kicks from Disneyland.”

The pervasive impact of corporate influence is well documented in, *The Mouse That Roared*, by Henry Giroux and Grace Pollack. According to them, “(I)n the age of branding and endless commercials, our children have lost their ability to fantasize and instead have become consumer machines.”

With this sea change in play de-emphasis, from make-believe fantasy activity where trees and bushes become forts—branches swords, to colored plastic guns, shields, actualized cartoon characters, kids are conditioned to depend on manufactured fantasies and no longer exercise and develop the ability to self regulate. According to many psychologists the ability to self-regulate is fundamental to cognitive and emotional development. Elena Bodrova says children’s capacity for self-regulation has diminished significantly. It is not coincidence that 1990 marked the first time CQ (creativity quotient) testing showed lower scores than in previous years. Laura Berk, professor of psychology at Illinois State University, states, “Self-regulation predicts effective development in virtually every domain”. She suggests it is a better predictor of success in school than a child’s I.Q.

Some Observations

I believe diminished executive function is a direct response to several cultural shifts in contemporary society starting with a significant de-emphasis on unstructured play in developmental years. Without the experience of building an ability to self-regulate behavior, one of several elements associated with executive function according to Bodrova, kids drop out of school and fall behind in effective development. Without self-regulation, learned and experienced by playing, the individual tends to rely on external

supervision. There is little creative growth— purpose is vaporized and direction lost.

High school dropout rates are high. Classes are regimented with standardized curricula and testing. Teachers teach the test because they are subject to judgment on “successful” rates of student “achievement”. Students are frozen into knowledge buckets—passive subjects of a system that does not challenge their ability to self-learn.

By imposing programs like “No Child Left Behind” a false sense of empowerment incurs. False, because it imposes a one size fits all and puts pressure on educators to demonstrate that a standardized system works. Instead, it fails utterly, reducing students to mediocrity.

Another shift that affects and modifies (diminishes) authentic creativity is the recent history of emphasis on safety—the Hovering Syndrome. Fewer students have personal experience with risk taking. With increasing hours confronted with video and computer screens, risk is just a vicarious experience. No real risk at all. Parents play a big part in their zeal for buckling up, helmeting, insisting on knowing geographical locations of the kids throughout the day. It’s a twenty-four-hour coddling; taking a risk is not a usual event. So, the consequence is that creativity suffers.

Discovering the Art of Play

Playing might be described as exploring ambiguity. It allows one to stand aside from oneself to observe in the dream state the essence of the warrior self and give it room to move. Playing is having a conversation with one’s self. I don’t think creativity can occur outside of the play activity. Only in playing can one be creative in the sense of discovering a personal, authentic moment. It is here the unconscious becomes lucidly conscious and the paradox of what is real or not, is accepted (but not necessarily resolved.)

It is serious business. Most of us lose the skill of playing when we leave childhood. We are taught the “real” serious business is to not play, but work. This idea of work seems to me designed to fit us

into robotic activities so others, perhaps even ourselves, can make money from our programmed activities. How do we relearn the skill of playing we owned as children? We must desire it, and try to remember how it felt, and practice daily.

How do we perceive reality? *Creativity might be thought of as a coloring of one's attitude to external reality.* Is it just a subjective phenomenon? As we relate to our perceptions of external reality is there a sense of compliance? Acceptance? If so, might there also develop a sense of futility— as if nothing matters? A condition where one thinks of herself as a victim of fate?

Jung said that we spend the first half of our lives concerned with adapting to society. That is, I would say, forgetting how to play and dream, and focusing on the ordinary— relating to external reality. The second half of our lives, according to Jung, is spent living out universal and spiritual roles. I would add, providing we learn to play.

What to do Now

In fifty year's of working with college students I have seen a generalized shifting of expectations in entering Freshmen. While they have much the same hopes for success and a desire for a best possible grade, their ability to take charge of their own learning has diminished. In my Basic Studio, a foundation design class, most students initially need specific and clear direction in a proposed project. They want to know exactly what I envision as the end product so they can reproduce it. The interpretation is, the closer they can come to *my* expectation, the better their grade. It is about imitation. The idea of generating an authentic, novel (playful) concept into the project potential is a scary proposition. What if the instructor doesn't like it? The grade sits like an Imperial Arbiter.

I have found that by explaining to my students that I am really interested in ideas generated by them, without criticizing the genesis or the validity, they are released from the self-imposed pressure of trying to anticipate what I want. To the contrary, I urge them to challenge the possibilities to find a unique solution. Sometimes this

is done by having them work in pairs or small groups. They can feed off other imaginations and have a group responsibility. Later, they are more willing to assume personal responsibility for an authentic solution. Once this happens a few times, the power of play as a unique, creative tool unlocks their perception of idea solution and washes away any desire to imitate. They resonate empowerment.

This doesn't necessarily happen in the space of a class or two. It may not develop for a year or more. It certainly takes some time to undo the damage of progressive suppression of play activity.

It is a joy to watch students unlock their personal playground. It is amazing to see the authentic response to their own arsenal of imagination. They emerge from the cocoon of dreary, imitative dullness eager to play in a parallel universe, one with no limits and infinite possibilities.

In 2008, Gabe S. came to Linfield College as an aspiring artist. He wanted to be a Studio Arts major and signed up for the Foundation courses needed as pre-requisites for advanced work. Gabe was a typical student, not quite sure of where his interests would lead—so he tried a variety of media. Initially, he became interested in ceramics and demonstrated enthusiasm and skill. Nevertheless, his efforts were imitative at first, wanting to please me more than himself. By the time he was in his second year Gabe began testing the limits of clay. I encouraged him to go ahead and see what happens if—play with it, stretch his ideas beyond the conventional. Invent a new process outside of the textbook. Ask why do you have to do it this way?

What happened was that clay sculptures unlike any I had seen began appearing on walls, floors and corners. Thin, wavy sheets of clay combined with studio detritus appeared in surprising places—inside and outside. Soon, he was using less clay and more found objects. By the time Gabe was in his Senior year, his scale of working had expanded greatly. He explored whole walls with rough hewn boards, rusted sheet metal and inventive fastenings. He fully accepted the concept of play as a working method, and his final

Thesis project was a powerful, authentic piece that earned him an invitation to a gallery show in Portland.

Amanda H. is another student exemplifying the idea of creative play. Her first year in Ceramics was not noteworthy as she learned the basics of working on the wheel producing ordinary results. Her second year was quite different. After deciding to become an art major, concentrating in ceramics, she asked me to show her hand-building techniques—specifically, slab working. Her first efforts were a little clumsy, but adventuresome enough that we talked about ways to explore fantasy shapes. Naturally, I encouraged her to try out her ideas playfully, risking failure and see what happened if.

One day, Amanda asked me to look at her newest piece. It was a very small teapot. Perhaps, it would hold one cup. The unique thing was that the teapot looked like something from Alice's Wonderland. It had all the teapot appurtenances like lid, spout, handle and so forth, but not placed conventionally. Also, it was handbuilt with extremely thin porcelain slabs. Paper thin. I was immediately struck with the unique, authentic nature of her work and encouraged her to make another.

Amanda's Junior year was a flurry of concentrated energy. She had qualified for one of the art major's personal studio spaces and set up to explore her new passion. One amazing little teapot after another emerged. She began exploring glazes that would enhance the small, sculptural forms. We discussed firing processes and I gave her a small, experimental kiln she could use on her own. The shelves in her studio began filling up with miniature, fantasy teapots—each with five thimble-like cups to match. Every couple of days there were new pieces to critique. Subtle improvements became evident. For her Thesis show Amanda built her own tall pedestals—one for each teapot set. Ten in all, beautifully crafted and painted to set off the glazes. The art faculty bought half of them!

Amanda and Gabe are two examples of the power of play as a creative force. Both emerged from the influences of the ordinary, imitative environment where play was discouraged. They came to

Linfield conditioned to expect supervision in their learning, but re-learned the skill of play and took charge of their own authentic learning skills. They left empowered with play skills and resolute self-determination. Life tools! I love what I do.

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