

Developing an Action Research Plan for Personal Action that Inspires the Use of Collaborative Play by Teachers in the Small Group Curriculum Planning Process

I stood before the group of eight preschoolers, a captive audience, just waiting and looking directly at me with full attention as I started to explain our activity for this class period. I went on for a few minutes, talking about the alphabet and how some people used sign language to show letters with hand gestures, in preparation for helping the students learn some of these. Soon, I was interrupted as a small voice rang out. “I know all of the letters! A...”. Clearly, I had gone on talking a little too long, and my explanation had become tiresome. Other voices joined in. “B, C, D, E...” The entire group proceeded to turn the recital into song, singing the entire alphabet in perfect unison. There was no stopping the song, nor would I have wanted to do so. In another classroom situation with a different group of young students, at one point I asked the group, “are there any more questions?” One girl raised her hand. “I have new shoes. Do you like them?” Before I could answer, other students followed. “I have a red shirt.” “I have a red shirt, too!” “I have a dog on my shirt.” “We have a dog at home, her name is Chewie.”

The message was clear: these students have mastery over their own play. They acknowledged and understood the meaning of my words as the “teacher”, and still, they were able to express themselves with joy and humor, and with unyielding certainty that I would “play along”. They were right. With their playfulness, they took ownership of our gathering in a way that seemed to improve our readiness for the rest of the class activities. I notice that in many cases of my existence in the “adult world”, my own certainty in that same respect seems dormant, or even missing. Thinking back, I don’t actually believe that my dispositions and instincts to play have decreased at all from when I was that age. Nor do I believe that I am any less able to notice opportunities for play. What I do notice, is that I have, over some length of time, developed an uncertainty that my own play will encourage others to play along. What was once a prompt for others to join me in play is now instead withheld as a possible “disruption” or “annoyance” to others. What was once a comment that helped to shift a conversation in a spontaneous and creative way is now suppressed as a non sequitur or becomes suspect as a source of confusion.

Play and self-consciousness compete for my attention, and eventually, play yields. I seek to restore my ability to pay attention to play, to know that it is available and to accept that it comes out of a state of mind in which I choose to engage at will. Play involves my own decision and ability to trust – not only my awareness of how much I trust those around me to “play along”, but also my willingness to take the time to develop the trust in the first place with others so that I may establish the permission to play, even if that does not happen for a while...

Introduction

In January 2008, I visited a performance of True Story Theater, a theater company in Arlington, Massachusetts, that develops the performance by creating an improvisational scene based on a brief story of a real-life event of an audience member who volunteered to tell it to the group. A series of these were performed and displayed a range of emotions, from the funny to the sad, from the touching to the frightening. After acknowledging that the participants seemed to be having a lot of fun, a friend who was attending with me concluding by saying, “I could never do that”. Sensing that this statement might be a kind of a wish in disguise, I started to more deeply consider why the actors and storyteller seemed to be enjoying the experience, and what created the “fourth wall” that separated the audience from the “stage”.

Reflecting on some other recent more personal experiences with theater education, I recalled peers who were developing their skills as actors during classes and workshops and noted that these people were not simply engaged hard at work in terms of learning the craft, but instead their learning came from the tension that was created between work and *play* – the work of developing a discipline for the structure of theater that would provide skills and self-control, and the play of breaking free from structure to explore new ideas and find insights that had not been expected, predicted, or conditioned by an instructor or anyone else. In fact, I remember now that these people who most naturally exploited this tension were those who played most of the time, perhaps even more in “real life” than in the workshops.

By taking away the layers of stage work and practiced behavior that might support a more formal theater performance, I’ve considered that a core of play might be available to learners in many other types of collaborative experiences. One possibility seemed to be that “play” might encompass a number of types of behavior, and that at least some of these might be

still available and valuable to adults, even though much implicit understanding of play relates it to childhood experiences and a perceived freedom from responsibility that might be attributed to children. Could it be true that adults simply no longer needed to play in that sense and had grown out of it due to some natural process? Or, if play might still be a rewarding and valuable experience that might have a place in learning? Perhaps what used to be accomplished by childhood play was transformed into another adult behavior, serving a related purpose but taking on a very different language than the usual understanding of play.

In any case, I have come to believe that play is possible, achievable, and valuable in adult learning. Further, I consider that play might not so much be something that can be “added” directly into a situation, since this might imply forcing play to happen when there is no natural space for it. Rather, play might be better addressed in considering what barriers, both personal and social, might be removed in order to increase the possibility that play might happen, if it is appropriate for the situation. We might call this the “*play potential*” – space for play that has been established, at least partially due to conscious choices that we make about our attitudes, behavior, and environment, and style of communication with others. Finally, I suggest that play might then also be shared by members of a learning group, and that in situations where the play potential was increased, this would enhance the interaction between learners by allowing for a more enriching experience that draws out diverse understandings and knowledge. For my own action research project, I have found ways to explore how play might become a more visible and welcomed addition to the learning environment.

Background

Among the questions about the nature of play, two that might help in restoring play into adult learning are “what choices, events, conditions, or other factors have caused adults to

change or remove play from their daily life and behavior?”, and “how might the environment and conditions be established that create the space needed for play to happen?” Through exploring the literature of play as well as reflecting upon my own experiences, several themes might be offered that represent a more cohesive concept of what play is, and how it might be recognized. Some of these themes include the following (see **Appendix A** for more complete explanations):

- Play as a language of fantasy and imagination (*see Blatner, 11-14; Brannen, 31; Kane, 45-49; Paley(a) 7, 92-96; Sutton-Smith, 127-133*)
- Play as a system of storytelling (*see Blatner, 137; Paley(a), 35-41; Paley(b), 81-90; Terr, 171*)
- Play as a relationship-building and relationship-forming skill (*see Blatner, 21; Nachmanovitch, 94-101; Paley(a), 57-59*)
- Play as a way to have fun, perhaps breaking the structure of work (*see Blatner, 6; Sutton-Smith, 201-204; Terr, 26*)
- Play as a way to reclaim a sense of control in a chaotic environment (*see Blatner, 99; Sutton-Smith, 201-204; Terr, 26*)
- Play as a medium of creative expression and production (*see Brannen, Chap. 8; Kane, 223-225; Nachmanovitch, 37-40*)
- Play as the theater of everyday social life (*see Nachmanovitch, 133, 137-139; Sutton-Smith, 55-59*)
- Play as a way to set rules for interacting or establishing the ethics of fairness within a group (*see Paley(a), 39-41; Terr, Chap. 5*)
- Play as a source of support in the healing process (*see Terr, 194*)
- Play as a way of stimulating thinking and learning (*see Brannen, 19; Kane, 189-196; Nachmanovitch, 43, 66; Paley(a), 35-41*)

A great number of other themes of play might be found. How might understanding the perspectives above help the practical task of getting play potential to become more easily accessed? One possibility is that by becoming more sensitive to the needs of different kinds of individual and group work and interactions, we might be able to use one of these forms of play as an alternative to attaining progress in some situation and allowing person or group to move forward. From another perspective, we may consider why play has been lost (to the extent that this has actually happened), or why people have removed themselves from those “spaces” of

play. Might any of the following reasons be examined when recognizing and reflecting upon one's own loss of play?:

- Wishing to maintain a *work* ethic that will allow one to remain competitive with others and willingly giving up play in the pursuit of what we believe is “achievement”
- Simply failing to *take the time* needed to play
- Developing fears or apprehensions that might suppress the risk involved in engaging in play?
- Perceiving play to be destructive of one's authority or status, or counterproductive to fulfilling personal (or professional) responsibilities
- Allowing oneself to become part of environments or communities where play space is not sufficient or encouraged
- Simply forgetting to play amidst the needs of daily life and those of others
- Believing that we “know” the world as adults and thereby assuming that the role of “fantasy” and “imagination” involved in play are no longer necessary.

From these kinds of considerations, a personal reflection on play tells me that several levels of behavior might be getting in the way of play. On one level, play takes time and attention, and if I simply do not account for that in my own life, play will not happen. On another level, play perhaps is a threat to the standards to which I hold myself, and I might suppress urges for play when they contradict my need to maintain order, organize myself and help to organize/orient other people, and establish my value in social situations. On a third level, play represents a risk and a movement toward uncertainty, and my own personal courage and openness to change might need to be tuned and fully active to benefit from play.

Based on some of the themes above as well as my own experiences with play, I suggest a focal point of play that will be used as a point of reference and guidance in my action research. For these purposes, the *function* of play in a collaborative learning experience is to add flexibility into the structure of the experience, providing space to fulfill playful inclinations of the collaborators. Play can help group members to find new ways of expressing their own ideas and therefore help mutual learning, or it can be a way to suspend a group's dependence on the structure of the process and move away from it for a while. Play might also serve as a

transitional method for moving between different parts of a collaborative process or as simply a way of clearly delineating the different parts. The *form* of play in collaborative learning might then be one of several, for example: sharing of stories, exploring thoughts in a humorous way, experimenting together with new ways of doing things or new ways of using materials, or imagining scenarios from one's own point of view or by taking the role of another person.

One example of a “play” situation of my own occurred in a past workshop. The workshop leader interrupted the formal part of the workshop and handed each participant a small item, announcing that we were taking a brief detour to help break up a long segment of the workshop. Each item was some type of simple toy (Slinky, rubber ball, noisemaker). The leader then told the group that the items were ours to keep and that we could take these with us. She simply asked each of us to suggest what we might do with the item when we arrived at home. Responses included statements such as the following: “I’ll probably put it on my desk”, “I’ll give it to my son”, “I’ll throw it at my boss”. After the answers, no other explanation was given, and we continued with the formal part of the workshop. How did this use play in a collaborative learning endeavor? This particular case was an example of play forming a break between parts of the structure of the workshop. It involved collaboration in the sense that each person heard others answer the question, and often some acknowledgement of the humor or agreement of that answer was expressed collectively. It also involved risk, both by the workshop leader and by the participants – the leader took a risk by introducing a suggestion that did not make sense with the workshop subject matter, and so it might have confused the participants. The participants took a risk with their answers such that they might not seem clever enough, or they might have risked exposing some personal information or attitude that would otherwise not surface in the course of the workshop.

Another example of a play situation that I have experienced was in a workplace meeting a number of years ago. At the very start of the meeting (during a very snowy winter period of time), the organization's director greeted the group and then told a story about a particularly enjoyable experience of living in the city after a large snowfall. She then asked each meeting participant to express one quality of snow/snowstorms that he or she particularly enjoyed. After this, the meeting proceeded without further mention of the snow. In this example, this engagement of play served as a transitional tool – it allowed the meeting participants to leave behind any stresses that had held us before the meeting, and it set a relaxed tone for our discussion. Through our own short stories, not only were we allowed to express something that was personally meaningful, but also we entered the meeting able to release some of the rigidity of our expectations to find answers or conclusions during the meeting, which was helpful in that case, since we were discussing a complex project and needed to raise issues rather than make final decisions.

Through these examples, I also demonstrate the possibilities that play need not be particularly demanding of body or mind, that it not take place in a way that causes adults to have to adopt behavior of children against their preferences, and that it need not detract from the learning potential of the situation or disrespect the importance of the group work. Play might happen through simple speech, gestures, and even attitudes, and it may take a form that might not normally be labeled as “play” as it is regarded in childhood form.

My Existing Situation and Rationale for Intervention

For my action research project, I have considered the role of the “play potential” in my own collaborative learning situations and have drawn inspiration from my current role as a curriculum developer and teacher in a preschool/afterschool program. In this setting, I work with

a group of core teachers (assigned to specific age levels), helping to develop classroom activities that support them as well as develop and teach classes of my own. Collaboration occurs between us because we all hold specialized knowledge and understanding; by engaging in classroom planning together, we hope to create lesson plans and activities that are more consistent from class to class, integrate multiple areas of pedagogical requirements, and utilize our areas of knowledge in a way that enriches the experience of the students. Specifically, my area of knowledge involves the integration multimedia and technology resources into classroom experiences such that students develop fundamental computer literacy skills, explore ways to understand and interpret information, reinforce reading and writing skills, and develop and publish creative projects and personal artwork. The special knowledge of the core teachers includes awareness of the educational standards and guidelines for early childhood education, personal knowledge of the students within their associated age level, and experience with teaching styles appropriate for children.

Generally, planning sessions that happen with this group involve much direct discussion of what lessons and activities might be planned. It seems that planning often focuses on what are the correct topics to be addressing at a particular point in time. The main outcome of the planning seems to be a decisional one – if we have collectively decided and agreed upon a particular topic, and division of labor for the preparation of upcoming projects is made clear, then we consider the planning to have happened in a satisfactory way.

Over time, I have noticed that the limitations of this form of planning have led to some inadequacies in my own teaching practices and processes. First, I have found that lessons and activities that I have created for my own classes have been only loosely related to those of the other teachers. Additionally, I have found that the time needed to implement our planned

activities is often under- or overestimated. It also appears that it is difficult to predict what kinds of activities will actually be more interesting and engaging for the students themselves, so the level of excitement of students shows mixed results.

This situation has led me to develop a central question for my action research plan: What actions might I take to introduce the possibility for play into teacher planning sessions? At this stage, my goal is to develop a plan that will guide me to take these actions, with the hope that they would start to help remove the barriers that might be constraining the potential for play as described earlier. I acknowledge that the use of play in teacher planning might be *one of* the factors that help to alleviate the challenges mentioned in the previous paragraph. At this time, my area of concentration is simply on whether or not collaborative play might be introduced into the group planning process in the first place.

A Brief Reflection...

I was in second grade, in Mrs. B's class. There was some idle time in class after recess and before the start of the next lesson, so I took some time to sketch a picture of Mrs. B on a blank sheet of paper. I was not so skilled as an artist, but I hoped to finally make my own contribution to the many drawings and other artwork that had been created by others and positioned around the classroom by Mrs. B. with such pride. Now, my intention was to take my drawing, make some cuts in the paper, and then fold it up and tape it back together into a small box, later to present it to Mrs. B., maybe even suggesting that she might use it to hold paper clips. As Mrs. B. started the lesson though, I ran out of time, my drawing still incomplete, and without the color added yet, anyway. I stuffed it inside my desk. At that moment, Mrs. B. came over, opened my desk, and plucked out the drawing, with her face locked in an expression of irritation. I realized at that moment that she misunderstood the drawing to be a mockery of her, and I had neither the opportunity nor the words to express that it was meant as a gift, that the awkward gray circles were only my feeble attempts to draw her hair, not a commentary on my respect for her. In that instant, and perhaps on several other occasions later on, it seemed that my play "got in the way", and eventually, I allowed myself to believe that this was inevitable.

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At this point, it might be asked, why is "play" the focal point of this action research? Within the current field of organizational development, it seems that a great number of tools might be used to address collaboration efforts in a kind of setting such as teacher planning. What about the role of a capable facilitator? What about the use of other structured methods of

interaction, such as using “think-pair-share”, group-oriented problem-based learning, and brainstorming?

While those are certainly valuable, I make one distinction here regarding play that relates to my own past work, including my school-aged classroom experiences. In those situations, play was often specifically mentioned as something that prevented progress, that cause a disruption to “getting work done”, that emerged from laziness, avoidance, and indifference. Other kinds of approaches to learning might have been regarded in neutral ways at worst if they did not fit in a given situation, but play seems to have been singled out as a decidedly negative influence in learning, despite the way that I recognized its positive effect on my feelings and to the attention that I gave to what I was trying to learn. This paradox attracted me to explore the nature of play once again from a personal and professional point of view. Rather than just a tool, or resource, or method, I began to view play as part of the mystery of (adult) learning, a frame of reference which drives my fascination with this field and with the secrets that it keeps.

My assumptions are that collaborative play is individually and collectively rewarding, that it creates a novel opportunity for mutual learning in the teacher planning process, and that it does not involve any special knowledge or preparation and is accessible to all adults. Further, I believe that using play in teacher planning will allow outcomes of the sessions to move beyond simple decisions about classroom topics. By using play during planning, I believe that this will catalyze a new form of the process where the following take place: 1) teachers are much more free to expose our individual areas of knowledge (and personal unique qualities) and make our own ideas and expectations more transparent, 2) teachers are able to perform first-person experiments with the activities and lesson plans that are suggested for the student classes, thereby getting a more practical sense of the timing of the activity, logistics required, and points of notable excitement or challenge that will arise during the actual implementation with the students, and 3) teachers will come to enjoy the planning process and associate planning sessions with a more fun and creative style of interacting compared to our past notions of how a typical meeting works.

Beyond the initial implementation of the action research, I have considered some possibilities for future work as well. In this situation, I am addressing a single, relatively small, known group of adults involved in a periodic teacher planning process. Because play is a natural part of the curriculum anyway for the young students, it seems that it might be more easily used by teachers as well, and teachers in this situation are more likely to accept the relevance of play to our own work. The current central question of this research might be part of a first phase of action research, which involves the initiation of collaborative play as a mode of interacting with teacher planning, but other phases might address medium- and long-term goals. A second phase might address how to introduce collaborative play such that it more clearly increases the mutual learning that takes place between teachers; a third phase might consider how to introduce collaborative play such that the planned lessons and activities for the students actually show more integration of teacher expertise and consistency over time and between classes; a fourth phase might consider how collaborative play in teacher planning has actually led to improvements in student learning.

Developing the Action Research Plan

As a way of beginning to address the types of actions suggested above, I have considered that certainly, introducing collaborative play into teacher planning might take place in many ways that do not necessarily involve actually *making collaborative play happen explicitly during the teacher planning sessions*. In response to the ambiguity of what it means to play and the personal nature of play as discussed in the literature overview, it seems that there might be (at least) two ways to think about how this might happen:

- 1) development of the environment in which play is most likely to happen, when it is appropriate
- 2) establishing the guidelines, practices, and permissions of what is actually happening during the play and how it takes place.

Regarding these two perspectives, I consider that my plan for action might then address both simultaneously. The first item might be an “indirect” approach since it does not specifically assume that play is happening but rather that it is possible. The second item might then be a “direct” approach since it assumes that play is likely to happen, appears to be desired or accepted, or is already taking place.

A central idea of my action research is the formation of a clear set of actions that I might take, both during and outside of the teacher planning session, to inspire collaborative play. The main idea is the creation of a “Personal Engagement Plan” – an annotated list of actions that I will take around teacher planning session that are intended to develop the “play potential” of the teacher group. In this idea, I will continually develop the list of actions, implement them, evaluate the results, amend the actions, and implement and evaluate once again. My initial formulation of the Personal Engagement Plan for this action research is included in **Appendix B**.

One metaphor for the list of actions in the Personal Engagement Plan is that they serve as a “recipe” for change. While collaborative play itself might manifest in much more spontaneous and unexpected ways, the Personal Engagement Plan seeks to explicitly define clear actions in a format that makes them easy to understand, digest, and carry out. Further, some guiding principles of the Personal Engagement Plan are the following:

- actions should focus on removing or breaking down barriers that might inhibit collaborative play more so than actively adding collaborative play into teacher planning
- an action should generally not depend upon the completion of others before it takes place – actions in the Personal Engagement Plan are independent to allow them to be more easily changed and removed in future iterations of the action research cycle
- an action on a Personal Engagement Plan applies solely to the individual for whom the Plan has been developed (the “Owner”); an action should never *require* that others participate (although, of course, a hope for the action research is that some individuals might choose to participate on their own terms)
- actions should help to establish a “safe” environment for risk-taking, experimentation, and freedom from judgment or criticism

- an action should never in any way disrupt the safety, privacy, or other rights of others

Within the Personal Action Plan, each individual action will further be considered with a dimensional view. Rather than simply be included as part of a single long list, each action will be defined with at least one category along each of the following dimensions. The purpose of the dimensional view is to consider how actions might be defined with respect to different orders of magnitude; this may eventually help to suggest areas of need during the Personal Engagement Plan revisions in future action research cycles.

Temporal: is the action to take place Before, During, or After the teacher planning session?

Impact: is the action Direct or Indirect (i.e. in reference to numbers 1 and 2 above)?

Scope: is the action expected to involve change that takes place at a Personal level (just the Owner of the Personal Engagement Plan), a Group level (the teachers in the planning session), or the Institutional level (the organization that is supporting the teacher group)? (Again, only the owner will be primarily responsible for actually implementing the action, and any Group- or Institution-level actions will be revealed plainly to others).

Along with the indicators that categorize the actions as mentioned here, each action will include an annotation that accounts for other factors related to the influence of the action from a systems-thinking point of view. The annotation for each action will address the following questions, as needed:

- 1) What impact does this action have on people, processes, or the environment, outside of the teacher planning sessions?
- 2) What time needs are required to implement this action? Does extra time need to be allocated for it where it is not already available?

How will the actions be decided? One proposal is that actions take on as simple a form as possible initially, keeping in mind that there may be opportunity to refine them later.

Stemming from this idea, I might consider several ways to help decide upon the actions. New actions might be developed by drawing upon my own direct teaching and learning experiences.

In what situations did collaborative play happen and work well? Is it possible to imitate some of the behavior that took place in that situation and translate it to teacher planning?

In a more direct way, I have already experimented with the Personal Engagement Plan in limited ways. In particular, I have actually carried out the action of “creating a playful learning activity before a teacher planning session as a way to initiate hands-on play during the session”. This happened in two forms: I developed an activity involving magnets in the form of a game for preschool teacher planning, and I developed a “digital story” with a humorous tone for afterschool teacher planning. In each case, by doing the work to develop a concrete activity ahead of time, I noticed that teacher play took place during the planning as the other teachers tested my activity, added ideas, and imagined improvements and student responses. By carrying out this action, I developed a more realistic sense of the time it might take to help establish the conditions that would allow play to happen, but I also found some confirmation that the teacher planning group seemed to be willing to spend some time at play and perhaps even welcomed it.

Another approach to defining the actions of the Personal Engagement Plan might be to utilize the experience, energy, and encouragement of constituents. Primary constituents, such as myself, other teachers, and the school directors in my own setting will be able to provide a number of examples of play through the observations of the students, and a number of these ideas might be reproducible by myself or other teachers and suggest how I might take action to get that to happen. Also, personal friends such as those who are “always playing” in life will serve as inspiration, not only to help develop ideas about how play happens, but also to engage with me to help keep my own mind in a playful state. A possible action on the Personal Engagement Plan might be to simply speak with these “playful” people in general about my own project as a way to adapt myself to more playful behavior and speech.

Another source of understanding of play comes from some of my own recent experience with theater. Because theater education often involves play in the form of warm-up exercises, brainstorming prompts, physical movement activities, and other kinds of activities that take the form of games, this may serve as a reference guide for developing safe kinds of ways of testing new behaviors and alternative points of view. Certainly, direct interviews might be useful as well. By asking other teachers in the teacher planning group if and how they might like to develop a better sense of play in our meetings, I might be encouraged to find ways to take personal action that will contribute to the playfulness of the group.

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A Brief Intermission

We might sometimes view play as the result of permission to break free of the structure in which we have agreed to follow. If you, as the reader of this paper, have made it this far, then it might be said that you have dutifully followed the structure that I provided, perhaps by reading from page to page, perhaps by skimming for general ideas, concentrating on some sections, skipping some sections, and intending to return to others still for a second read. I suggest that we might develop a way to play at this moment, both as a temporary relief from the labor of reading a long paper, and as a form of an experiment of my own. If play is to become useful in the learning process, then one approach might be to allow it to be used with some flexibility without completely removing the player from the material. How might you play right now? Perhaps you might abandon reading, but instead, let's consider what play might mean within the context of this academic paper, but also with a degree of freedom from the detail presented here about action research.

Allow yourself to imagine, for 1-2 minutes, that you would rather be playing than reading this paper, in fact, that this paper (or at least a printed version of it) is simply a plaything itself. You are willing to do anything that is playful with it for a little while, if only to take a break from actually reading. How might this paper be used for play in a fun way, a way that does not relate to its "intended purpose"? Some examples are provided – can you add others?:

Question:

How Might I Use Play In the Course of Reading a 30-page Research Paper?

Roll it up and use it for kindling on a camp fire.

Disassemble the stapled pages and create a fleet of paper airplanes.

Crumple the pages into a tight ball and play fetch with a dog.
Make an animation flip-book by drawing a series of action images on each page.
Fold it over and wedge it under one leg of a wobbly chair to keep it steady.

Other Questions to consider:

- *How did you experience this activity?*
- *Did you disregard it and skip ahead?*
- *Did you simply read it to “get the idea” and move ahead anyway?*
- *Did you actually try it?*
- *Why?*
- *What did you find to be sources of resistance, hesitation, or relief from this activity?*

Extra Credit Section

Now that you are a “reader” again, consider how you might involve play in other areas of life that might not be described as playful. What would this even mean? Are there situations in which play simply is not useful? What are the consequences of forcing play into a situation, if that is even possible?

How might play be used, for example, in other ways relating to the reading of this research paper? If you were to sing, rather than read, the title of this paper, what would that sound like? If you were asked to develop this paper into a screenplay for a blockbuster film, what genre of film might it be? A comedy? A horror film? As you are reading, imagine yourself as the illustrator of the various passages here. What images would be inserted, and where?

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Extending Action Research Ahead in Time

How do I imagine that the Personal Engagement Plan will be modified and improved over time? At this point, I consider that transformations from earlier to later stages might take place:

Early iterations:

Most of the actions in the Personal Engagement Plan are categorized as “Before” or “After”, most are “Indirect”, and most are “Personal” on the dimensional scale. The actions that are happening at this point mainly serve to help me the explore the current nature of collaborative play and reflect upon my own understanding of it and personal capacity to embrace it. Also, because I am the only Owner of a Personal Engagement Plan at this point, the actions that I take should serve to help me develop my own capacity for participating in play and help me also to become more sensitive to the proper balance of play and other forms of interaction that are part of the collaborative process. Additionally, because the idea of collaborative play (or the actions that support it) may be initially viewed with uncertainty or skepticism, it may be helpful at first to concentrate on the actions that are within my own immediate control and that help me to initiate my own playful spirit and attitude. At least, such focus might support the development of my capability to be playful in a more fundamental way and in my own life, beyond the teacher planning process in a workplace setting. Perhaps then in teacher planning sessions, collaborative play is not yet explicitly introduced or even mentioned directly as a suggestion for the way that are interacting together. Rather, at this point, I am only seeking “collaborative play” in a personal way, to the extent that I am consistently comfortable following my own playful instincts at appropriate times during teacher planning.

Middle iterations:

The actions start to evolve in new ways that involve not only doing smaller, well-defined tasks but that might build upon the *tools* of action research such that these become useful later. For example, an action on the Personal Engagement Plan at a later stage might be to “explain the principles of a Dialogue session to the other teachers and propose that try it briefly at a later time”. The use of Dialogue might itself be a process that takes place overall a period of time, so

using this as a tool might require repeated implementation of related actions on the Personal Engagement Plan to help prepare the group to use it. Dialogue might focus directly on addressing statements about play, such as “It is not easy for adults to play. We might be able to find ways to play in our meetings that still allow us to get our work done.” And “I most enjoyed my own school experiences when...”.

Another tool that might be useful in the form of an action on the Personal Engagement Plan would be the use of a Critical Incident Questionnaire at the end of a teacher planning session. Particularly when some playful activity had been observed or experienced, it might be useful at this point to ask teachers to fill out the questionnaire in order to freshly capture the feelings and attitudes that were present when the play was happening. If at some point, the teacher planning sessions had progressed such that teachers were bringing experimental classroom activities to them and asking each other to play through experimenting with them, the KAQF framework might be tried. This might help teachers to be sure that our methods of experimenting with classroom activities actually match the questions that we are trying to answer about what we think the students need. Freewriting might be used as a way to also encourage teachers to express thoughts safely concerning the role of play. Also, this might help the teachers to start to expose some of the language that might become useful in later conversations about the use of playful activities.

Later iterations:

Many of the actions in the Personal Engagement Plan might now start to be categorized as “During”, “Direct”, “Group” and “Institutional”. This reflects the growing acceptance of using collaborative play during the teacher planning sessions themselves and an increased sense of more widespread and distributed involvement by other teachers and administrators. It may

not happen that the use of the term “play” even appears in teacher planning conversations until these later iterations of the action research. One possibility is that other members of the teacher planning group might eventually become Owners of their own Personal Engagement Plan, meaning that some of the teacher planning session might even involve addressing multiple Plans in a coordinated way. Another possibility is that the Personal Engagement Plan might evolve as a template that becomes useful in introducing other types of change into the teacher planning process or broader organization.

Even though the idea of the Personal Engagement Plan currently applies to the individual group setting, it is possible to conceive of the action research as it is carried out on a larger scale. Across an institution in which several teacher planning groups might be operating, some of these groups might participate in the research such that at least one member of the group develops a Personal Engagement Plan for initiating collaborative play. Results from this process might be measured and compared between groups where at least one Personal Engagement Plan is in use and groups where no such plan exists among any of the members. In the case of the former, some of the actions taken by those with Personal Engagement Plans might then include taking notes or creating a journal of their experience in the teacher planning, so that this may be consolidated with people from other groups.

Development of the constituent group also will take place over time. Direct constituents include myself as well as the others in the teacher planning. A key element of this constituency relationship involves the encouragement that we afford each other to take actions that involve collaborative play. Initially, I would be asking for permission from other teachers to use my Personal Engagement Plan and show it to them, reaffirming that it imposes no requirements upon them. Because collaborative play might involve taking the time required to experiment, tell

stories, etc., administrators will also form part of the constituency through establishing ways in which teachers might be available outside of class teaching time for teacher planning, which does not happen consistently right now. During the teacher planning, third-party observers who are not involved in the planning might be present to observe the sessions and record their observations so that these can be used as a measurement for evaluating the effect of the actions.

Indirect constituents fall into (at least) two groups: students and allies. The students are the preschool and afterschool students who are in classes being taught by the teachers. Although they do not take part in the planning sessions themselves, they can help teachers to develop ideas about what it means to play and the types of play that might be tested during planning. Teachers might directly ask students about enjoyment in their activities as well as observe when students find new ways to play. Allies are those individuals with whom I contact outside of my own school environment. These include teacher colleagues in other schools and institutions, the “playful” people that are my friends working in other areas outside of teaching, acquaintances from my theater experiences, and perhaps even those in the Critical and Creative Thinking program at UMass-Boston, who might invite and encourage me to keep thinking about play in new ways.

Evaluating the Personal Engagement Plan

The notion of collaborative play might continue to be ambiguous, but several measures can be taken to attempt to evaluate the effect of the actions in the Personal Engagement Plan. These measures take both quantitative and qualitative form. Generally, the involvement of the non-participating observers of the teacher planning sessions will contribute greatly to the consistent noting of behavior that suggests collaborative play. Measures include the following:

1. Number and Types of Actions implemented

- Which actions on the Personal Engagement Plan were carried out with respect to a single teacher planning session? (quantitative)
 - For actions that were not implemented, what prevented them from happening? (qualitative)
2. Instances in which teachers (who are not using Personal Engagement Plans) initiate playful behavior
- How many times did other teachers initiate behavior that represented play as defined above – behavior that helped to introduced flexibility within the rigid structure of the planning, involved activity that had an uncertain outcome, and involved some positive level of humor or lighthearted tone? (quantitative)
 - To what extend did the playful activity support the planning process rather than disrupt it? (qualitative)
3. Instances in which teachers expressed direct opinion of collaborative play
- How many times did teachers explicitly reveal acceptance or resistance to playful occurrences? (quantitative)
 - Did all teachers participate in the play? (quantitative)
 - What elaborations did teachers make about their beliefs, fears, hopes for collaborative play? (qualitative)
4. Support for teacher planning outcomes
- Did the collaborative play directly relate to the creation of student lesson plans and activities? Did the teachers play by directly testing the activities that would be used in classes? (quantitative)
 - How thoroughly did the use of collaborative play continue supporting the development of the student activities throughout the meeting? (qualitative)
5. Teacher mutual learning
- How many times did teachers reveal individual perspectives, unique knowledge or expertise, or examples of experiences with others during periods of collaborative play? (quantitative)
 - In what ways did teachers express interest in the knowledge of others during collaborative play, and to what extent did this knowledge immediately become a part of the play that was happening? Did all teachers contribute to the playful experimentation of the given student activity through offering knowledge from their own experience? (qualitative)

In addition to the assistance from observers to note these measurements as much as possible, my own reflective journal will contribute to the overall experience of noticing collaborative play. For an example of the evaluation in the form of a rubric, see **Appendix C**.

In consideration of another idea that has been used in our Action Research course, some evaluation might be considered that reflects a more qualitative view of the implementation of the Personal Engagement Plan. Within this language, the “plus-deltas” might be listed, where “plus” items reflect what worked particularly well, and “delta” items reflect a reaction to what might be changed. One approach to these might be for me, as the primary actor, to list my ideas under each category immediately after a teacher planning session. These also might be listed by third-party observers to the teacher planning process. One possible way to then use these lists in evaluation might be to compare what has been noted between my own list and those of the observers. Also, such lists seem to allow for changes to the Personal Engagement Plan that allow a manageable scope. If I only were to consider additions and removals of actions from the Plan, then it might become difficult to determine effects, since multiple changes might confound each other or create doubt about how they interact. By using the “plus-delta” lists to instead retain certain actions and merely make slight or incremental changes to them, I might then be able to more confidently associate the actions with the other quantitative measurements and do so in a way that helps build a knowledge base of experience through long-term observation of single actions.

Concluding Comments and Future Directions

Over time, the results of the action research might be used by teachers and administrators to determine new opportunities for collaborative play or at least to become aware of situations in which participating in play might enhance the teacher planning process or even the overall

environment of the organization. In a general sense, my expectations are that using collaborative play might need to be developed over a long period of time, since the actions in the Personal Engagement Plan are not meant to *directly* make play a formal part of the planning process. Rather than an additive method, the Personal Engagement Plan is a subtractive method which is an attempt to remove barriers to collaborative play and create a space for play that is more open, establishes the trust between teachers that permits risk-taking, and helps each teacher to develop their play according to their personal belief about what is enjoyable.

At the very least, I hope to slowly build my own participation in collaborative play, even if this happens in such a way that I find a playful state of mind in the presence of others, and even if the others are not as engaged in the play as I am. Over time, I would hope that collaborative play might become a more explicit part of the teacher planning process, such that we may discuss play openly, reflect upon new ways of achieving play, learn from and about each other in the process, and become accustomed to play to the extent that it becomes a natural part of the collaborative process.

Epilogue: A Final Reflection on the Action Research Process With Respect to My Progress in the Critical and Creative Thinking Program

As I complete the Action Research course, I'm able to identify a few concepts that help me to gain perspective on my CCT work and my progress within my 3-year process of involvement with the program. First, I have found that I have examined my interest in lifelong adult education to the point that I may now identify some more specific priorities for future work. Within my first few semesters of coursework, I had only generally navigated this field as my area of work and at most times only managed to think about my most general "wishes" in terms of how I hoped the broader system of adult learning needed to work. At this point, I have become much more comfortable with these specific issues and have found a scope that allows me to more realistically be involved in taking action without becoming overwhelmed with the breadth and depth of the needs that I still assume to be present. One of these priorities includes the *development of teachers/facilitators of adult learning* (both in formal and informal settings), and the ways that critical and creative thinking might become very beneficial part of ongoing teacher growth as a "reflective practitioner".

Another priority concerns addressing the realistic challenges and opportunities that surround the *interaction of adult education teachers* (especially my own) as a community and the potential for shared experiences and new and improved relationships. Continually through the action research process, I have been reminded of the importance of relationships, beyond the idea of "networking" and including more personal and practical approaches to sharing my work with others and asking others to share their own with me. My current perspective is that in my journey to explore revolutions of adult learning, I might always be noticing whether or not my own actions are not only helping to achieve some logistical goals but also simultaneously supporting the ways that people, including myself, form relationships and keep them strong.

One possible consequence is to be particularly aware of periods when I might be spending too much time in isolated “busy work” and instead need to leave some of that aside for a while and spend more time actually speaking with people and engaging in group settings. Ironically, I also perceive that these issues seem to be among the most difficult (in general, and for me personally), and that it is most unclear how much progress is possible in these areas with respect to the work that I might do. Perhaps part of my motivation, then, is the unknown that surrounds the complexity that is needed to create the change that will lead to a truly sustainable and exhilarating realization lifelong learning as a much stronger part of our culture.

Some final reflections on my own specific workplace situation also assist me in understanding future possibilities for action research in my work. First, work as a part-time teacher in a small, resource-starved non-profit community center is hardly guaranteed, and this instability might represent the norm of such an environment. Therefore, I must consider my action research with some flexibility such that I will likely eventually transfer it to another situation. My specific peer group will change, along with the logistical conditions and of course goals of the work. Even before that time, I might find that my action research, from a systems thinking perspective, may connect with the broader organization in ways that extend beyond teacher planning. This may then expose limits that reveal some other action research plan as more immediate and critical.

Also, I note that I have an opportunity to extend some of the actions of my Personal Engagement Plan to my life more generally. In addition to noticing how specific actions influence play in teacher planning, might some actions also help me to develop a more fundamental sensitivity to play, which in turn increases my own capacity to understand new forms of play which are obscured to me now? I’m open to the possibility that I may look at my

action research as a link to my personal development; my action research now may serve as a conduit for bringing additional questions back into my exploration of critical and creative thinking, both during and after my formal participation in the CCT program.

Certainly, many of the playful experiences in my own educational situations have been initiated by fellow colleagues in various learning settings. In a previous role as course instructor, I was attending a workshop of a fellow instructor, mostly to provide classroom assistance as she led the participants. She was giving a particularly technical and complicated demonstration, and after about 40 minutes, it was clear that it was only about halfway finished. Already, the participants were shifting constantly in their seats, engaged in the material but starting to become a little bogged down in the complexity of the subject matter. Without warning, the instructor interrupted herself in the middle of a sentence, and said, "I don't really like the 'feng shui' of this room. Do you mind if we change some things around?" The participants seemed happy enough to get out of their chairs, and even made their own suggestions, rearranging the room. Some even offered interpretations on why a particular "flow" of the room was an improvement. Everyone sat down once again, and the demonstration continued.

After the day was over, the instructor mentioned to me that she had noticed the unresponsive eyes of many of the participants, and she mainly wanted to "reset everyone's brain" during that time. What happened is that she took an environment where everyone was stationary, staring in one direction, and silent, and effortlessly transformed it into one where everyone was moving, active, communicating with each other, and noticing details that had been previously ignored. She did not call this "play", and maybe no one else in the room would have done so, but I can appreciate now that this is exactly what was happening during those moments. Most of all, the instructor trusted herself to know that she was ultimately helping herself and others in an interesting and enjoyable way and created an atmosphere that was likely an improvement over simply "taking a break". What might appear to be a sacrifice was actually an effective way to supply new life into her work. Play is a small gift, and one that is given at least twice – once "in the moment", and then again later as the reminder of a memorable experience and perhaps as a story to be passed on.

Appendix A: Themes Appearing with Respect to the Meaning of “Play”

Play as a language of fantasy and imagination

(see Blatner, 11-14; Brannen, 31; Kane, 45-49; Paley(a) 7, 92-96; Sutton-Smith, 127-133)

Play can be a way to express one’s conception of a fantasy world and communicate to others, particularly when the fantasy might seek to invoke feelings, strange or novel situations, or other abstract ideas that might become more flat if expressed in everyday verbal language. Play is a source of active engagement with new possibilities, rather than a passive source of entertainment created by other people in which I am only an observer.

Play as a source of inspiration, a medium, and product of storytelling

(see Blatner, 137; Paley(a), 35-41; Paley(b), 81-90; Terr, 171)

Through narrative expression that involves play, we are telling others the story of ourselves, including our wants, needs, memories, and hopes. This type of expression is a fundamental way in which interpersonal learning takes place, predating formal schooling systems.

Play as a relationship-building and relationship-forming skill

(see Blatner, 21; Nachmanovitch, 94-101; Paley(a), 57-59)

By allowing ourselves to play, we are essentially engaged in practicing the scenarios that will help others relate to us more easily. Play can help us to expose deeper attitudes, likes, and perspectives that can quickly help common ground to be discovered with others.

Play as a way to have fun (perhaps breaking the structured nature of work)

(see Blatner, 6; Sutton-Smith, 201-204; Terr, 26)

If we distinguish an element of life called “work” in which we act toward a specific goal rather than acting in the moment, having to give priority to behavior that leads to a goal means possibly acting in ways that are not the most comfortable, rewarding, or interesting. Play is an approach to temporarily relieving the discomfort during or after a period of work and helps restore fun that breaks up work into manageable segments and counteracts the fatigue that might be associated with work. In another sense, play as “fun” might be used as a

healing process – it serves as a release point for stress, anxiety, anger, which may be representative of trauma. Play is a type of physical manifestation of humor.

Play as a way to reclaim a sense of control in a chaotic environment

(see Blatner, 99; Sutton-Smith, 201-204; Terr, 26)

When engaged in play, we can create a situation in which we maintain power over the environment and may be able to spontaneously adjust the “truth” that has been established to suit our whimsical or serious wants and intentions. Inside of play, we are able to endow ourselves with authority and special abilities that allow us to imagine getting what we want and eliminating confusing or chaotic influences.

Play as a medium of creative expression and production

(see Brannen, Chap. 8; Kane, 223-225; Nachmanovitch, 37-40)

Tapping into creative energy might be aided by engaging in play, which can help us to reposition or remove the boundaries that are imposed upon us by external situations or by ourselves as a system of coping and organizing complexity in our world.

Play as the theater of everyday social life

(see Nachmanovitch, 133, 137-139; Sutton-Smith, 55-59)

Play is a way to expose to ourselves and others what we think is important and provide commentary on connections that seem to be taking place in our observed world. By playing, we exaggerate key ideas and suggest to others how social responsibilities might be distributed among people in a community. Play is a reenactment of how we perceive the forces of power and conflict of our world.

Play as a way to set rules for interacting or establishing the ethics of fairness within a group

(see Paley(a), 39-41; Terr, Chap. 5)

In the course of play, we establish rules in order to standardize the constraints of our interactions, so that we might prevent any arbitrary conditions or occurrences that might disrupt the play. While the outcome of the play itself might be one thing, the rules that we establish might create a foundation for agreeing upon how to act with others in future situations that are not as playful.

Play as a source of support in the healing process

(see Terr, 194)

Not only does play create opportunity for humor, but also it may be useful in situations where difficult or traumatic experiences have dominated a person's feelings and attention. Play can act against these experiences as a way to restore equilibrium in one's emotional states.

Play as a way of stimulating thinking and learning

(see Brannen, 19; Kane, 189-196; Nachmanovitch, 43, 66; Paley(a), 35-41)

Because play need not insist upon a strict outcome, it can help to stimulate experimental behavior and ideas that are particularly important to an individual. Play can help a new experience to become more meaningful to a person as the exploration of this idea is connected to personal learning intentions. As a creative process, play can lead to paths of serendipitous thought and belief that are less noticeable when approaching ideas directly.

Appendix B: My Initial Personal Engagement Plan

Before	During	After	Direct	Indirect	Personal	Group	Institutional	Action	Systems Impact*
X				X	X			observe students and note sources of play based on actual experiences	Requires time to make notes, may disrupt my responsibility to teach while students are in my own class, may create a distraction for students if I am observing them while in other classes
X				X	X			develop a playful learning activity that supported a particular topic in preparation for a teacher planning session	Time required is already allocated within my own personal planning schedule; may require unexpected time to research activity ideas
	X		X			X		Ask permission from teachers to experiment with my playful learning activity	May not fit in with goals of a particular planning session
X		X		X	X			In the course of daily life outside of my workplace, specifically look for instances of play and reflect upon what made them so	May need to dedicate some personal time to interaction with others that is not already a natural part of my daily routine

X				X		X		“interview” teachers about experiences when they played in their classes along with the students	Need to find appropriate times to do this; may not ask teachers to reveal personal information
		X						reflect upon the teacher planning meeting and make notes of instances of when we played	May need some extra time, but note-taking is already accounted for in post-planning time
		X		X	X			make revisions to the my planned learning activity based on our discussion/review	May require a large amount of time, and might require permission from teachers to ask them for help to do this after the formal planning session has ended
X				X	X			Speak with a friend that I regard to be particularly playful	Helpful to explain to friend about my project and goals
	X			X		X		Tell humorous or enlightening anecdote to teachers about a previous playful experience with students	Should be conscientious about revealing information that might be embarrassing to a student; may not be seen as a good use of time in during the teacher planning session
		X		X		X	X	Ask teachers and administrators for feedback about playful experiences and whether or not they were enjoyed	Teachers and administrators may not be prepared to observe the planning process with the level of attention that will produce useful feedback

* Systems Impact addresses the following questions:

- ✓ What impact does this action have on people, processes, or the environment, outside of the teacher planning sessions?
- ✓ What time needs are required to implement this action? Does extra time need to be allocated for it where it is not already available?

Appendix C: A Rubric for Evaluating the Personal Engagement Plan

1. Implementation of P.E.P. Actions	
Which actions on the Personal Engagement Plan were carried out with respect to a single teacher planning session?	List:
For actions that were not implemented, what prevented them from happening?	Explain:
2. Teacher Initiations	
How many times did other teachers initiate behavior that represented play as defined above – behavior that helped to introduced flexibility within the rigid structure of the planning, involved activity that had an uncertain outcome, and involved some positive level of humor or lighthearted tone?	Count:
To what extend did the playful activity support the planning process rather than disrupt it?	Explain:
3. Teacher Responses	
Did all teachers participate in the play?	Y / N:
How many times did teachers explicitly reveal acceptance or resistance to playful occurrences?	Count:
What elaborations did teachers make about their beliefs, fears, hopes for collaborative play?	Explain:
4. Teacher Planning Outcomes	
Did the collaborative play directly relate to the creation of student lesson plans and activities?	Y / N:
Did the teachers play by directly testing the activities that would be used in classes?	Y / N:
How thoroughly did the use of collaborative play continue supporting the development of the student activities throughout the meeting?	Explain:
5. Teacher Mutual Learning	
How many times did teachers reveal individual perspectives, unique knowledge or expertise, or examples of experiences with others during periods of collaborative play?	Count:
In what ways did teachers express interest in the knowledge of others during collaborative play, and to what extent did this knowledge immediately become a part of the play that was happening?	Explain:
Did all teachers contribute to the playful experimentation of the given student activity through offering knowledge from their own experience? How?	Explain:

6. Plus/Delta Notes

What elements of the action research process are working well?

- + _____
- + _____
- + _____
- + _____
- + _____
- + _____
- + _____
- + _____
- + _____

What elements of the action research process might be changed?

- Δ _____
- Δ _____
- Δ _____
- Δ _____
- Δ _____
- Δ _____
- Δ _____
- Δ _____
- Δ _____

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