

(The information in this document has also been posted on the course wiki)

Evaluation and Inquiry:

When considering my own various experiences in adult learning, I have considered that most learning opportunities have a “feel” of work, meaning that the effort to participate fully is noticed, and there is some absence of play, experimentation, and enjoyment that might be a natural part of the process. Through my interest in collaborative play, I have wondered how I might take action to help establish a tone of collaborative play in learning opportunities and use collaborative play as a support system for allowing learning to be enjoyable.

In my background research, I have found a number of resources that describe notions such as what it means for adults to play or directions toward building collaborative learning opportunities for adults. I’m still working through these, but the ones that I have read show a general consistency in suggesting that play can be a valuable way for adults to engage with learning. One definition of play is the following: “Play: state of being that is intensely pleasurable. It energizes and enlivens us. It eases our burdens, renews a natural sense of optimism...”. Many descriptions of play that I have found are similar in the way that they describe play without really defining it in a completely concrete way.

Reflection and Dialogue Epicycle

In my own learning experiences, I have noticed that many of them have taken the form of proposing a specific goal and then indicating the path to be taken to reach that goal and then taking that path and reaching the goal. I considered that when I most enjoyed learning, there was an element of play in the situation in which I was allowed to deviate from that path and spend time on an activity which had an uncertain outcome. In a simple example, I recall a high school math teacher asking us students to try to figure out how to use a graphing calculator. There was no answer sought, just an expectation that we would discover *something* of use along the way. In another example, I took a continuing education class in beginning piano. The teacher interrupted the lesson to ask us to think of a song that we liked. She then asked us to try to find the correct notes to the beginning of the song on the piano keys, even when we had not yet learned note names. In both of these situations, we played. After reflecting upon this, I considered that in my ongoing adult learning settings, I might be even more rewarded if the play was collaborative – if the learners were all playing in this way but doing so in a coordinated way which we had a shared experience that supported the development of a relationship between learners, beyond the more isolated play of the examples above. By playing, I found a very satisfied feeling from the idea that I had actually created some knowledge for myself, not simply given it directly or even prompted to find it from an external source.

Proposing and Planning Actions

After starting with a more general idea about taking action to add collaborative play to adult learning, I found new meaning during a period of much struggle and uncertainty about the

purpose of my ideas. My thoughts were that play could serve as the mechanism for creating an alternative in learning to any structure that was imposed upon a group of people. In other words, play could serve as a legitimate way to support the learning itself while allowing the learners to break free from the structure that had been placed on the situation or that they had adopted for themselves. Further, I was having difficulty in defining how collaborative play could be generally placed into a situation, so I had to change my overall framework of thinking. Rather than figuring out how to build collaborative play into “any” learning opportunity as a functional action, I started to see that what I wanted to happen was for myself and other learners to simply become more sensitive to times in which play could be used to break up the structure of the learning and restore a sense of fun in learning, *when appropriate*. In other words, I recognized and acknowledged that I did not want to figure out how to increase the collaborative play in any situation. Instead, I realized that my hope for collaborative play was that it could be understood by learners to be an option for their style of learning at a particular time and develop the capacity to recognize this and use it. I started to understand that a slightly more narrow approach to my own action research was in order, so I renewed my focus on the specific issue of planning classroom lessons with other teachers at a preschool/afterschool center where I work. This seemed to be a natural match, since we were tasked with collaborating in order to create lesson plans and activities for students that were enjoyable for them and allowed them to play. Meanwhile, I observed that we were never really playing ourselves in the journey to accomplish this.

The general course that I took to create a plan for action took the following form.

Overview of project:

- use of collaborative play as a way to enhance learning experience for adult learners
- play = activity that has uncertain outcome which encourages experimentation, surprise, humor, and personal enjoyment
- collaborative play = play that is done by group of people in the same learning experience, such that their actions are interdependent – an act of a person during collaborative play may be a response to that of another or a prompt to further action

1. Initial thoughts

- a. My interest in adult education focuses on lifelong learning and what it takes to encourage myself and other adults to develop a positive view of ongoing learning, engage in learning with a spirit of enjoyment, curiosity, and excitement, and consider how learning with others can be rewarding and create change, while at the same time taking many forms that may not be available in traditional classroom settings or educational institutions
- b. First considerations – how to create an action research plan in which collaborative play is introduced into adult learning settings such that it results in an enhancement of the learning experience. Issue: could this “enhancement” be a quantifiable property?

- c. Next steps – I considered what it might mean to use myself as a guinea pig in my action research. The change that I would be introducing would focus on actions that I would take, I would inquire into the way that I have been acting and how others have approached this question, and I would then evaluate the change based on my own actions and those of others.
- d. Primary action research idea: - I would focus on how to develop a “Personal Engagement Plan”. This would be a recipe for actions that I would take relative to three periods when encountering a learning opportunity. The idea is that prior to an upcoming well-defined learning opportunity, I would be able to create a customized Personal Engagement Plan with “before”, “during”, and “after” actions that I could take and then actually carry out the actions that encouraged the use of collaborative play. Evaluation would be based on determining whether or not a certain result was noticed to be different between situations that involved collaborative play, and those that didn’t.
- e. Emerging idea – I would focus on using my own work as a teacher to help think about how to create a Personal Engagement Plan. In my work with a youth education program, I am responsible for helping teachers develop curriculum and lesson plans for preschool and afterschool students that involve using multimedia and information literacy (primarily using computers as tools for these). The lead teachers are responsible for a level of student based on age, and this is then associated with learning goals that reflect certain subjects (reading, math, creativity, etc.). I am knowledgeable about the multimedia resources, and teachers are knowledgeable about the core topics. Neither of us understand very well each others’ areas, so we must work together to create integrated activities and lesson plans for the students that account for both. Based on this need, I considered that area for possible collaborative play was in the way that I and the other teachers could learn from each other and collaborate to plan for the activities for the students. Drawing upon the notion of collaborative play, how could I create a Personal Engagement Plan that would help to make our planning sessions more successful?

Constituency Building Epicycle

In the development of this plan, I have been noticing that the constituency building process has evolved somewhat naturally from the requirements of the plan itself. Primary constituents include the teachers and directors at the youth center and the students themselves. Secondary constituents include others who might observe the play that is happening in the planning sessions and those assisting me to develop the ideas for play that can be brought to the group.

A few practical areas in which this might be used realistically in the near future:

1. Preschool – upcoming planning to develop a science activity fair with the teachers to engage the kids to gain a sense of wonder and excitement about science and space
2. Afterschool – upcoming planning to develop a project that would engage the kids in creating a digital story of their personal lives

Implementation

Example of a possible Personal Engagement Plan:

To be clear, the focus is collaborative learning during the lesson planning process with teachers, not during the actually carrying out of the lesson plans with students. The following activities are those that would be done by me relative to these planning sessions.

“Before” activities:

1. observe students at play in a classroom during a more unstructured time and note specific instances in which play seems to lead to inquiry or insight
2. ask teachers for a list of possible topics that will be addressed in their classes within the following weeks
3. build a simplified prototype of a game or fun activity that might be used during a student lesson
4. find one joke, humor article, comic strip, or interesting image that is directly relevant to topics at hand or teaching
5. find a “toy” that might be relevant or interesting to the teachers

“During” activities:

1. present the joke/comic/etc. to the group
2. briefly offer the “toy” (#5 above) to the teacher group during planning and ask them to “test” it for use with the students
3. mention to the other teachers that I intend to approach our planning from a playful point of view, meaning that I would like to play with any idea before judging its value or making a decision based on it
4. make a suggestion to teachers that we play with the prototype game “as if” we were the students, and then do so if possible
5. write down suggestions made by the teachers on how to improve or clarify the game
6. ask teachers (and myself) to reflect upon the personalities of individual students and tell a story about times when they seem to be having fun
7. brainstorm ideas for an alternative game that might be developed

“After” activities:

1. make suggested changes to the prototype game
2. create additional prototype games as suggested, as possible, and present these in future planning sessions
3. make an entry in a reflective journal that describes particular moments of play between myself and the other teachers

Evaluation and Inquiry:

As a matter of practical evaluation of the plan, I start with a type of checklist of outcomes. The questions below highlight issues that might be changed through the introduction of collaborative play, and these generally whether or not a specific change can be observed after collaborative play has been used.

Outcomes to be measured:

Possible evaluation would occur by answering the following questions:

1. Did the other teachers explicitly agree to engage in play or be open to the idea?
2. Did I experience a level of enjoyment beyond the norm for teacher planning sessions?
3. Did any other teachers express that they were experiencing enjoyment during the planning session?
4. How many times was laughter elicited during the planning session?
5. Did all of my planned actions in my Personal Engagement Plan actually take place? If not, what prevented it?
6. Did the teachers and I form a concrete lesson plan for a specific period of time?
7. Did the number of interactions between the teachers and I increase between the planning session and the following one?
8. Did my understanding of the teachers' original intentions for lesson topics become more clear after the planning session? Did their understandings of my resources become more clear?
9. Over time, do the other teachers take any more initiative at bringing/suggesting new ways of play into the planning sessions?

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