

Thinking Outside the Blocks: Lego Day in a Pedagogy of Play

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Engaging students while providing them with the necessary linguistic and critical skills as a foundation for further exploration are the principle challenges for those of us who teach disciplinary introductory courses. My own response to this challenge has been to develop and implement what I refer to as the ‘pedagogy of play.’ Informed by the work of bell hooks, G.H. Mead, and J. Huizinga, the pedagogy of play is grounded in the notion that an orientation toward ‘play’ and ‘playfulness’ provides the framework for developing curricula and teaching practices that emphasize learning as process rather than outcome. This paper outlines the principles of a pedagogy of play and describes one of the quintessential examples of this approach: “Lego Day(s),” a strategy I developed to provide students with a concrete context in which the abstract concepts ‘culture’ and ‘society’ could come to life.

Let my play be my learning, and my learning be my playing.

- Johann Huizinga [orig.], 1938

Pedagogy of Play

A pedagogy of play is more than a classroom strategy – more than a repertoire of exercises or interaction strategies for engaging students. It is a form of critical pedagogy, an approach to the practices and processes of teaching that inform all aspects of the courses that I teach: course design, curriculum development, assessment strategies, and classroom practices. In this context, I use the term ‘play’ to refer not to some specific activity or type of activity, but

rather to denote a quality of mind that shapes how I approach all aspects of teaching and learning.

To understand the ethos of play as a pedagogy we must first understand the distinctions between ‘play’ and ‘game’ as interactive forms, since these two terms can be used interchangeably in other contexts. Play is relatively unstructured – the interactions in play need not be constrained in any way by expectations that emerge from outside the

context of the play itself. The roles that the actors take up in play need not be stable from one instance to the next. For example, when kids play ‘house,’ the terms of the interaction are determined largely by the players themselves so that when little Rachel takes up the role of ‘mommy’ that character interacts with other characters very differently than when Karla or Rob plays ‘mommy.’ The fact that in everyday reality the role of ‘mommy’ is attached to female primary caregivers neither constrains nor defines the actor who takes up that role in playing ‘house.’ While play can have a specific beginning and a clear ending, the focus of play is on the process rather than on a particular outcome.

Games also have a particular beginning and a specific ending point, but are much more clearly structured than play. In a game, the players each have particular roles that they take up and a set of rules for how to interact with one another within the context of the game. These roles are stable from one instance of the game to another. In game, the focus is on the structure of the interactions and/or the outcome. Games have a defined space: a playing board, a baseball diamond, a football field. Players’ interactions with each other as well as their movements in the space are determined by the structure of the game. For example, players may roll dice to establish where on the board their piece can move or have assigned ‘territories’ and/or duties in the space determined by their role: pitcher, quarterback, etc. In game, at least part of the point of the endeavour is to win, most often within a particular time-frame established by the terms of the game itself. Play, on the other hand, opens the possibility for players to shift among multiple roles in any given interaction. In play, the rules may change at any point, if the players so choose; the focus is on the players’ interactions, and the point of the adventure is the doing and not the outcome. Since play has no particular outcome or goal it can be based on cooperation rather than competition, and, although it can have a clearly defined ending-point, it need not be constrained within a particular time or place. Play can be suspended at any point (paused for supper, or at the end of a given class time) and then resumed later.

My incentive to develop a pedagogy based

on the principles of play came from teaching introductory sociology courses. In any introductory class, most of the students are in their first year of university and in many departments, the introductory course is designed to provide students with the basic linguistic and intellectual tools that they will need in order to successfully complete the upper level courses that the department has to offer. In many instances this includes providing students the wherewithal to develop and hone critical thinking skills.

For most first-year students, university classes are an almost surreal combination of the mundane and familiar liberally sprinkled with the completely unfamiliar and/or strange. They have just spent the better part of the last 12 or 13 years of their lives learning how to ‘do’ schooling. School is a game that they feel that they have mastered; here, they are in familiar surroundings (a classroom), in a familiar role (as student), with someone at the front of the room in an equally familiar role (as teacher), but expected to interact with the material and the other participants in new and different ways. I realized that one of the biggest barriers that my first-year students faced was the fact that I was requiring that they learn a whole new set of rules and expectations of and for schooling, and that they resisted my efforts to do this by finding some resonance with what they knew, and used the rules that they knew for interacting in that context as their default position. In other words, they subverted my attempts to teach them new rules, roles, and expectations by simply refusing to acknowledge that the ‘game’ was different.

In some respects, the first year of university is a lot like grade primary (aka kindergarten). In both contexts the students’ experience a completely new learning forum, and both contexts involve a separation from home and a process in and through which they are being introduced to a new stage in their lives. In order to successfully disrupt the expectation that schooling is a familiar game, I subvert the game itself by building a classroom space and a curriculum grounded in the principles of play. My rationale is that if I take them back to play as part of their orientation to my course, I have a better shot at successfully disrupting my students’ expectations of what schooling is about and thus a better shot at

teaching them new approaches to thinking, teaching, and learning.

For example, I disrupt students' expectations about how to interact with the person at the front of the room by refusing to answer to the term "Miss." However, even though I am clear that I prefer to be addressed by my first name or as Professor Krug if they *need* an honorific, many of my first-year students persist in referring to me as "Miss," which is how they have been taught to address all female teachers. I did have one student a couple of years ago who could not remember my name, but did remember that I don't like to be called "Miss" – so she called me Bob. That class was an epiphany for me; it was in that moment that I realized that 'play' could work but only if I was willing to commit to all of the principles – especially the notion that players themselves can and do alter the rules as they go along. In order to be consistent with the spirit of 'play' I had to accept the designation produced in and through this interaction (i.e., answer to "Bob").

I started developing the principles of a pedagogy of play after reading bell hooks' (1994) *Teaching to Transgress*. [H]ooks argues that teaching is a performative and thus must take the audience into account in order to be engaging and successful: "to embrace the performative aspect of teaching we are compelled to engage audiences, to consider issues of reciprocity" (p. 11) and that is what called me to answer to "Bob." [H]ooks (1994) also contends that the processes of teaching and learning must be fluid and open wherever possible. If the classroom is to be a truly interactive space, I must inhabit that place in such a way that it anticipates the possibility for our conversation to go in a direction other than the trajectory outlined by the day's agenda. The pedagogy of play models the principles outlined in *Teaching to Transgress*, disrupting the practices of power in the familiar game of schooling by transforming teaching and learning into a process of empowerment and a shared journey of discovery. The pedagogy of play is an orientation to the 'processes' of teaching and learning which opens the space for new and different elements to emerge in any aspect of curriculum development or classroom practice. This pedagogy is a transgressive critical approach to teaching and learning. What this all means in practical

terms is that when I am designing a course I endeavour to ensure that the readings, the classes, and the assessment strategies are all grounded in the principles outlined above.

Lego Day: The Quintessential Strategy in a Pedagogy of Play

Lego blocks are an ideal medium for classroom exercises developed in and through this pedagogic strategy. Lego blocks are familiar to almost all of my students – most of them already know how to play with them. Also, they know that it *is* play. Lego blocks can be put together in any number of configurations, so that the players' own imaginations supply the form the end product will take. This medium can be used as an individual project or as a collective effort. How that collective effort is accomplished is also quite flexible; the strategies for accomplishing the task at hand may differ from one group to the next. Lego constructions can be easily dismantled and the same blocks re-used to build something entirely different. There are few limits on the possibilities contained in a single bag of Lego blocks. Indeed, the building process itself can look very different from one group to another and how the group goes about making something is as relevant to the learning opportunity as the construction they produce.

Lego Day was originally designed as a single classroom exercise to introduce my students to the ways that sociologists and anthropologists understand the concept culture. However, it was such a success that I have now expanded it to at least two classes so that we can also use this exercise to talk about cultural diversity, cultural drift, society, social institutions, and social structure. The original Lego Day was an experiment to see if all the groups of students in each introductory class would produce similar structures if their material conditions were the same. I tried to ensure that each group was starting from approximately the same place in terms of both the instructions and the materials that they had to work with: each group had a bag of Lego blocks with approximately the same numbers of blocks, sizes of

blocks and approximately the same distribution of colours. All groups were given the same instructions: work together, make something, use all the blocks. Once each group had finished constructing whatever they choose to make, we took a look around the room to see what kinds of things they had made. The variety of constructions was quite wonderful. The constructions themselves operated as a metaphor for culture and the conversation shifted from culture as an abstract idea to an exploration of the ways in which culture is a product of human interactive processes. This exercise provided an opportunity to model the operations of metaphor at the same time that it brought the concept of culture as a human accomplishment into focus.

The original Lego Day was such a success that I added Lego Day 2: a small group exercise in which the different colours each represent a different social institution (i.e., red = economy, white = religion, yellow = family, blue = education, black = polity) and each group was instructed to work together, build a representation of society that indicated how these institutions fit together in Canadian society, and to use all the blocks. Lego Day 2 opened the space to talk about theory (and is now also included in my 300-level theory course) and demonstrated the ways different theoretical perspectives produce different representations of society. I have colleagues who use Lego exercises as ‘team-building’ strategies, or to talk about the dynamics of group processes. I am currently designing an online introductory course that will include virtual play with Lego as a component.

There is almost no limit to the possibilities for using Lego in the classroom. The distinction that I am making here is that as Lego Day becomes a transgressive critical pedagogy *in* a pedagogy of play and not *as* a pedagogy of play. When the principles of play become the foundation for pedagogy the spirit and practice of teaching and learning become process oriented rather than outcome oriented and take place in a context structured by an ethos of reciprocity and intersubjectivity rather than a subject-object or knower-novice dynamic. From inside a pedagogy of play, Lego Day becomes an adventure in thinking outside the “blocks.”

References

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Biography

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