

## Play as a Method of Engaging Students in Developmental Writing

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*The article focuses on using creative play in the developmental writing classroom to enhance student engagement. Theories that support the use of play in the classroom are briefly described. Several teaching techniques are shared, including developing metaphors as part of teaching a grammar unit, acting out readings from novels, and using poetry to enhance the student learning experience. The author's experiences of using each of these methods are discussed as is a description of strategies for using students' creative work as part of formative assessment.*

One challenge that many educators of students in developmental classes encounter is finding ways to engage students who come from a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs about education and learning. In addition, students frequently come to the college classroom with the belief that school is not a place where play or fun occurs. Rather, school is equated with work, and writing is often believed to be an especially boring or unpleasant task, a notion which results in disengagement. This article will discuss strategies to encourage students to participate in creative play in a developmental writing classroom for the purposes of keeping them interested and engaged.

What does it mean to play? The very definition of the word suggests engagement (in sport or recreation). A synonym for play is frolic, spontaneous, happy play. Underlying each of these definitions is spontaneity, creativity, and involvement. A significant implication embedded in concepts of play is collaborative activity—often play is something we do socially in groups. Play, in a classroom environment, can be defined as both structured and unstructured moments of engagement in learning for the sake of fun, amusement, and creativity. Throughout this article,

play is defined as collaborative activity that is structured and rule-based, but intended to engage students' imaginations and creative thought processes. Changing the dynamic in the classroom to one in which play is encouraged can make the writing class a more positive experience for students and help them develop a desire for lifelong learning.

### Theories That Support Play in the Classroom

Piaget suggested that play serves multiple purposes, including assimilating new information and assisting in the process of accommodating new information with existing schemata ("Play," 2005). Similarly, Erikson examined the role-playing nature of children's play, suggesting that play provides a safe environment in which children can try out different adult roles ("Play," 2005). Nicolopoulou (2010) reflects on Vygotsky's theory about play and child development, noting that one primary component of Vygotsky's theory is that play has structure and rules: "In short, play is not simply frivolous. On the contrary, if properly understood, it can serve as a prototype of a form of activity constituted by shared and voluntarily accepted rules, within which people can experience an intrinsic—rather than merely instrumental—motivation to strive for mastery of the possibilities inherent in that practice" (p. 44).

A common theme in discussions about the value of play is its beneficial use in collaborative groups to encourage creativity and imagination (Sullivan, 2011). At the same time, there is general consensus that play is essential to engaged learning (Warner, 2008; Brown and Vaughan, 2009). The techniques of play that are used in adult education classrooms are often categorized under experiential learning; role play is a primary example and is often used in the classroom for the same reasons that Erikson suggested children play—it gives students a chance to safely try out different roles in spontaneous and new ways. Other play strategies include using games (increasingly prevalent in the digital gaming world), which Rieber and Noah (2008) suggest "are a way of knowing the world, a mediation between experience and understanding" (p. 79). Beidatsch and Broomhall (2009) identify the importance of role-play in history classes to assist students in learning what it means to

be a historian. Harris and Daley (2008) examined the relationship of play to social capital for adult learners. (Social capital is defined as cooperative networks, connections, and building relationships within a community.) Exploring, creating, and being spontaneous are all concepts tied with play. In addition, "Göncü and Perone (2005) have found that pretend play and improvisation amongst adult learners foster community building that requires dialogue, trust, reciprocity, sharing and negotiation—all characteristics that are associated with social capital" (as cited in Harris and Daley, 2008, p. 52).

Brown and Vaughan (2009) consider how play is useful for adults as a way to make deeper connections socially, as well as make connections between disparate ideas and to come up with new solutions. "The genius of play is that, in playing, we create imaginative new cognitive combinations. And in creating those novel combinations, we find what works" (p. 35). Their research describes how play is an essential component of development for both human beings and animals alike. Brown and Vaughan also assert that human beings need to maintain the ability to play through adulthood in order to be critical-thinkers and problem-solvers. In discussions with teachers and trainers, Brown and Vaughan found that there is a desire for students to maintain an ability to play, citing the value of being able to think creatively rather than to think mechanically. Furthermore, play in the classroom helps adult learners develop emotional intelligence by assisting them in connecting with one another in teams (DiNapoli, 2009).

Writing instruction is one of many areas in education in which play is an essential element to keep students engaged. Weinstein (2006) writes about the out-of-school writing of at-risk youth in Chicago, describing as pleasurable the work they do writing their own lyrics for rap pieces. She identifies the various types of pleasure that students seek by writing: "Sometimes what comes through is a feeling of solidarity, of belonging, of identifying oneself as part of a larger whole. . . . Sometimes, conversely, there is a pleasure in establishing one's individuality. . . . Finally, there is the sheer fun of the experience itself: pleasure as 'play'" (p. 275).

## Activities

Based on this research about the value of play as an impetus for learning, I have developed multiple activities that engage students in creative play to broaden student thinking about writing concepts. Several of these activities will be described here along with some discussion of the resulting products.

### Grammar Metaphor.

The use of metaphor is one approach to opening up the world of play for students. For example, the metaphor of a stoplight can help students understand the functions of the period and comma in a sentence (a period is a red light, which indicates a full stop, and a comma is a yellow light, indicating a slow down. A green light indicates that one should move fully ahead without stopping). The concept aids students both in the reading process (as many of the students in developmental writing classes tend to be fairly low-skilled readers) and the writing process in understanding how to cue their own readers. James (2002) suggests that “verbal and visual metaphors help academically underprepared students make conceptual connections between their own knowledge and what they are learning in class” (p. 26).

The grammar metaphor assignment can be used to have students develop a visual metaphor for dangling modifiers, wordy sentences, or misplaced modifiers. Students can work in small groups of three or four students and, as part of the assignment, develop a one-page note sheet explaining the concept, how to identify errors in their own writing for each category and how to fix the errors. Groups then present their metaphors to the class and provide classmates with their note-sheets.

This assignment requires that students think outside of their normal boundaries and to think of grammar in a different way. Metaphors that illustrate wordy sentences are often the most effective. A notable student-developed example includes sentences cut and pasted onto toilet paper. The wordy sentence used too much toilet paper while the concise sentence used just the right amount. Dangling modifiers also offer opportunities for students to play with the concept; in one example, students developed a diorama in which a dangling modifier was attached

to a train that went off the track and was left “dangling” while a second train made it to the station in one piece and on time.

Students are often delighted with the end product that they and other groups produce and engage at a different level in the assignment than in more traditional grammar assignment approaches. Such assignments provide opportunities for creative play, as well as collaboration. Brown and Vaughan (2009) suggest that if we do not continue to play, “Our behavior becomes fixed. We are not interested in new and different things. We find fewer opportunities to take pleasure in the world around us” (p. 38). Activities in the writing classroom that support play assist students in seeing college as an opportunity to learn for the sake of pleasure.

### Acting Out Readings.

In many developmental education settings, instructors in writing integrate reading activities to help students understand the connections between reading and writing. Such curricula provide many opportunities for students to play. Activities that support creative play include predicting and writing an end to a story before students finish reading a novel. The second is for students to prepare a mini-play for one scene of a novel. Students can choose the scene, design props, and then act it out in front of their classmates. Such activities serve the dual purpose of both engaging students and helping an instructor check in to see if students have read the material. Students who might not otherwise be interested in a novel or other text tend to be more interested in what they are reading when they are able to engage in a hands-on activity.

An example of playful activities in an integrated reading/writing class center on a group of students reading Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. In this instance, students were asked to find a way to connect to the plot by modernizing some aspect of the story. Notable products from the assignment included a rap that featured the primary plot points of the story and an infomercial advertising Dracula’s amazing life-extending capacity. Subsequent short exams showed that students who had engaged in the playful activities were more likely to remember the content than those

students in another class who were being taught through more traditional direct instruction methods.

### **Poetry as Play.**

Many students come to a writing classroom with many fears about making errors and being wrong in their writing. Such fear can be debilitating, causing students to hesitate to even try to put their ideas onto paper. Poetry is a less threatening way to acclimate students to a classroom in which play is acceptable and encouraged. A poetry activity that can be very helpful for setting a tone of collaboration and play is adapted from Statman's (1995) "Poetic Theory and the End of Science." Students first act out a poem about how the moon and sun change places as the transition between day and night occurs. From this activity, students then write their own poems. The instructor begins the process by emphasizing that there is no right or wrong way to write a poem. This sets the stage for subsequent lessons that teach brainstorming and writing as a tool for learning.

Another example of using poetry for play is to ask students to develop creative presentations for essays that they read. Such presentations can include story-boards, posters, raps, or short skits. This activity can be extended into a review presentation at the end of the class so that students demonstrate their knowledge of materials learned throughout the semester. One option in presenting the review material could be to write a poem about it. The other part of the review includes preparing a handout of notes for other students for study purposes. In these ways, students are engaged in the process of playing with language in a manner different from one to which many are accustomed.

### **Evaluating Play Activities.**

Both formal and informal methods of assessment can be used in evaluating play-based activities. In some cases, it may be best not to assess at all but rather to engage in play for play's sake. However, in those instances in which some sort of product is required, rubrics can be used to evaluate student knowledge of the concepts or content that was part of the assignment. For example, for grammar metaphors, students might be rated on their concept, how their concept demonstrated understanding of

the grammar point, and their ability to contribute to a collaborative assignment.

In many instances of assignments with a play component, students could also be required to complete a follow-up assignment that demonstrates general comprehension (in the case of reading assignments) or capacity to apply what was learned to other contexts. Students might be engaged in frequent editing sessions in which they identify and correct wordy sentences, dangling modifiers, or other grammar problems, in their own papers as follow up to a grammar metaphor assignment.

### **Conclusion**

Informally, students in my classes commented on how much fun certain assignments were or indicated that they had not ever had fun in an English classroom before. Engaging in play activities helped to diffuse some of the writing anxiety that many students felt coming into a developmental writing class. This was evidenced by greater creativity in student papers; for example, one student who had previously struggled with developing even short paragraphs was better able to add detail and write more about a topic after going through the exercises described here. In general, students also felt more comfortable working together in groups and sharing ideas with each other, which led to greater comfort levels in common writing course activities such as peer review.

Activities that encourage students to play can be powerful tools to support student engagement. In addition, play activities that are collaborative encourage students to participate by exploring creative solutions to problems. Brown and Vaughn (2009) summarize the critical role of play in learning: "Play isn't the enemy of learning [,] it's learning's partner. Play is like fertilizer for brain growth. It's crazy not to use it" (p. 101).

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