

Boosting Imagination: Incorporating Creative Play into the Writing Room

Incorporating creative play in the writing lab or classroom is a unique way to pique students' interest and boost their imagination. Exercises varying from describing Hershey's Kisses®, to using tape recorders for discussing voice, to using magnetic poetry to practice grammar are all ways that stimulate learning through the lens of play. Play theorists assert the value of incorporating play in all levels of education due to its appeal, especially to visual and tactile intelligences. Play also adds a sense of ease and leisure to a classroom atmosphere that can boost creativity and shift the learning paradigm while still conveying complex concepts to students.

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L. S. Vygotsky (1978) stated that “In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself” (p. 102). This concept of play is valuable far beyond the elementary school playground. Instructors who incorporate the principles of play theory into classrooms, even at the college level, can facilitate an environment that inspires students to new heights.

In addition to the benefits of heightened learning, both children and adults often view play as a form of relief from, or as a reward for, work. Since the habits we began in childhood carry over to our professional lives, we naturally find ways to incorporate play into our daily routines; we treat ourselves to a trip to the coffee shop or reward ourselves with a few minutes to surf the Internet after completing a rigorous task. At the end of those few minutes, we find that we feel renewed and relaxed and ready for the next project. It makes sense that the same concept could be successfully adapted to the college writing lab or writing classroom.

However, before incorporating play into the classroom or lab setting, it is important to consider that play should be used to reinforce or introduce a lesson rather than simply fill time in the day. Play also needs to be used in a way that utilizes an individual's ideal learning style. Howard Gardner expanded on Jean Piaget's views to detail several intelligences that shape how an individual learns. According to Gardner (1983), a tactile or kinesthetic learning characteristic is "the capacity to work skillfully with objects, both those that involve fine motor movements of one's fingers and hands and those that exploit gross motor movements of the body" (p. 206). Visual learners are similar in that by seeing an activity in a concrete way, abstract concepts become clearer. Ultimately, and obviously, a tactile learner will benefit the most from play, but all learning styles can find benefits from a few moments of fun.

Lieberman (1977) stated in her book *Playfulness: Its Relationship to Imagination and Creativity* that "being able to accept fantasy assimilation in the young child expands his cognitive horizon and will stimulate original products" (p. 132). Expanding the cognitive horizon is the goal of any educator and so play can easily be seen as beneficial in this way; however, for writing instructors creating original and stimulating texts is an equal aspiration. Such creativity can obviously create interest in not only the project at hand, but future projects as well. Play, in this sense, is a precursor for creativity and understanding. In a writing center or classroom, play can help students be creative and expand their thoughts. By allowing a student time to play, creative forces could likely be engaged and result in a more original text.

More importantly though, according to Sutton-Smith (1997) in the book *The Ambiguity of Play*, when a student and teacher/consultant play, their relationship immediately changes: "it is not the play alone that causes the upward change in the children's competencies; it is, rather, the new and special relationship with the tutor" (p. 40). Students will see the learning environment in a new way and thus see the teacher or consultant in a new light as well – stress will thus be reduced and creativity will be allowed to flow more freely.

CREATIVE PLAY IN THE WRITING CENTER

Some students differentiate the concrete act of putting words on paper and the abstract nature of rhetorical strategy. This disconnect often inspires great anxiety about the writing process. Therefore, students often come to writing classrooms and writing centers in a somewhat stressed state, which can be exacerbated by a hostile environment. Introducing an element of fun can help people relax and take their minds off their problems. For example, the consulting tables in the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Writing Center contain toys that offer visual or tactile learner tools to bridge the gap between writing concepts and play. Sometimes during a writing center consulting session, a consultant uses matchbox cars to visually outline the composition of a paragraph for a student. The Center also uses toys and objects to help students relax. Once during a visit a student, for example, continuously picked up a water tube and rolled it in her hand as she talked. She was apprehensive about her writing, and this activity seemed to help her relax. At one point she said, "This thing is awesome. It really helps relax me and focus my thinking."

Not every student is immediately going to like the idea of trying to make writing fun and informal, especially students coming to the writing center for the first time who expect a certain degree of formality. These students may even be shocked and initially might resist to a degree at first when consultants are seen using toys during sessions; however, most come to appreciate the new environment and embrace the chance to expand their creativity with a few moments of play.

GETTING STARTED WITH CREATIVE PLAY IN THE CLASSROOM

Teaching descriptive and narrative writing in the developmental writing classroom is difficult at times, especially with students who have not read much as children. That is why incorporating creative play is important in order to add relaxation. Unfortunately, students often view descriptive writing as "work." However, we can convince students that writing can be fun. Using the essay "In the Laboratory With Agassiz" (Spears, 2006) introduces students to the technique of description writing with the senses. The essay entails a young scientist's first experiment in a laboratory in which his professor allots

him an entire week to study the same haemulon fish. After growing a bit peeved at this assignment, the student finally sees the worth of truly studying an object for a long enough period of time.

Immediately after reading this essay, students participate in a similar exercise that encourages playfulness. Students are given some Hershey's Chocolate Kisses® and are asked to study their piece of candy just as though it were a haemulon. The exercise typically provokes laughter, and allows them to have fun with an assignment. Students read aloud the responses that they free write during the exercise. The following example is from Justin Dallavis, a developmental writing student at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville:

Like a garrisoned fortress, this foil encased chocolate stands before me. Its flag is raised to symbolize its occupants are ready for battle. This beautiful structure, with its wide base and tall tower, gives occupants a 360-degree view of its surroundings. The flag whips back and forth at any gust of wind. Unbeknownst to the lovely chocolate milk tower I have brought an army 10,000 times its size. The closer I come, the strong scent invades my nostrils. My men want to taste its blood, invade its walls and turn it into ruins.

The rest of the students in the class delighted in trying to come up with creative verb choices in free writing about chocolate, and this excitement seemed to transfer to their next writing assignment.

After the chocolate exercise, instructors lecture on techniques professional writers use when writing with detail such as writing with the senses, using similes and metaphors, and using compare/contrast. Often students are surprised to see that what they freewrote in class used professional writing techniques.

Another playful technique that helps transition fun into learning in the writing classroom and helps open up students to discussion is to incorporate images from modern magazines and popular culture in order to dissect issues such as: How does an advertisement deal with gender, age, race, and class? Who is the intended audience? Does the advertisement use persuasive language to attract customers? On what criteria can a student base the conclusion that an advertisement is effective? The Adbusters Media Foundation, which publishes *Adbusters* magazine, is a helpful tool; the group often uses imagery

from Calvin Klein and cigarette advertisements to make statements on social issues in its “spoof ads” (“Spoof Ads,” para. 4).

Yet another activity that may teach about writing while also engaging students in some level of play involves using a tape recorder. When discussing voice, students may tape each other and then analyze how their writing voices compare to their speaking voices. They may note whether their voices change in speed or tone depending on topic matter, whether active stories told use shorter sentences, and whether emotion enters a person’s voice. While having students record each other’s voice engages them in a short energetic activity, it also encourages them to think about the importance of understanding and developing their own voices in their writing process.

In the writing classroom, one issue that often crops up when discussing hurdles in the writing process is the idea of writer’s block. Goldberg (1986), author of *Writing Down the Bones*, has several playful suggestions for free writing assignments that encourage students to work and develop their writings into narrative essays. Goldberg (1986) suggests having students write about their grandparents, the streets of their cities, or people they have loved, among other topics. She also asserts that if students simply cannot find a topic to write about, to simply write, “I don’t know/I don’t know/I don’t know.” Usually no one writes more than a line or two of I don’t know’s before an idea strikes.

TECHNIQUES FOR TEACHING GRAMMAR USING CREATIVE PLAY

Once the content writing of an essay has begun, the student faces the challenge of incorporating grammatical competence. Teaching grammar skills creatively always presents a challenge for instructors. Some developmental writing instructors choose to begin with simple grammatical concepts such as the parts of speech and sentence patterns, which help students understand more complex grammar. Instead of learning through traditional instruction using worksheets and blackboard practice, students can benefit from the use of magnetic poetry, which consists of small magnets with words on them that can be rearranged. This activity gives them hands-on experience with how grammar works.

In order to teach the eight basic parts of speech, instructors can follow up lecture by hands-on work using magnetic poetry. The instructor should divide the students into small groups of about four or five. Prior to this lesson, it is helpful to request that students bring dictionaries to class for the exercise. Each group receives a box of unsorted magnetic poetry and a magnetic dry-erase board. Students then divide the board into the eight parts of speech and place the pieces of poetry into the appropriate sections. If they do not know the grammatical function of a specific word, they will use dictionaries to determine the most common use. This exercise provides opportunities to discuss how some words can be used as nouns or verbs depending on context (i.e. spring as a time of year or as an action verb) and how pieces of poetry representing word endings, specifically *-ly*, can change some adjective words into adverbs. At the end of the allotted time, students place the magnets into sealable bags labeled with the parts of speech and save them for another lesson. Traditional and non-traditional students of all ages have reported enjoying this small group activity and say that the departure from “boring” methods of grammar practice to ones associated with play increases satisfaction with the classroom experience and helps them visualize grammatical concepts in concrete ways.

In addition to understanding the parts of speech, students must understand sentence patterns so they can learn more complex grammatical constructions. To practice sentence patterns, students divide into small groups of four or five, and using the bags of magnetic poetry that were divided into parts of speech in the previous lesson, they use the poetry to generate creative sentences that contain the four basic sentence patterns. This activity helps students learn how nouns can become part of sentence patterns, functioning as subjects or direct objects depending on placement in the sentence. Physically moving the pieces around the board also helps the student correct common errors in sentence pattern creation, such as substituting prepositional phrases in place of true direct or indirect objects. Once the students have created examples of the four sentence patterns within their groups, groups can exchange magnetic boards and judge whether or not the sentences have been constructed correctly. For added interest, groups may choose the best or most creative sentences from the class.

Magnetic poetry works well with a variety of other grammar lessons including lessons on pronoun case, allowing students to substitute subjective, objective, and possessive case pronouns into sentence structures to see in a concrete way how the words work. For these exercises, the instructor should usually create sample sentences beforehand leaving blanks for the correct pronoun to be placed. All of these methods are creative tools to bring a playful attitude into the learning environment.

CONCLUSION

Just as drawbacks to incorporating play exist in writing centers, they also exist in the writing classroom. Some students may not be interested in participating in playful activities, and they may actually do better when participating in more structured and serious lectures and discussions. However, once they realize that there is a deeper meaning behind a playful activity, these students are often also more willing to try it next time. Plato (1968) once stated, "You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation." As writing professionals, it should be important to get to know the writer you are working with so you can help encourage his or her inner voice. Play is a wonderful way to get to know the writer on a deeper level and takes only a few minutes of time in each session. As populations continue to grow and change, a familiarity with play might become essential to our work in reaching new students in the future. More importantly though, it is a method we can experiment with right now – and have fun while trying.

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