
Using Play to Teach Writing

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This article explores the potential of play in the teaching of college composition. Drawing primarily on the theoretical framework of D. W. Winnicott, the author describes how he used ludic pedagogies to provide first-year writing students a “potential space” in which to explore a range of course elements including composing conventions, “authoritative” texts, and their own writing. By creatively transforming these elements through play, students learned to confront their anxieties about writing and reconcile the identity conflicts that typically accompany their transition to college. The author argues that play also positioned students to critique “authoritative discourse” that they otherwise would not have questioned. These findings suggest that play and an attitude of playfulness deserve a more prominent place in the first-year composition curriculum.

As an instructor of college composition, I have the difficult task of motivating students who find writing boring, intimidating, or both. I teach at a maritime academy where learning to write well is not a high priority for most students, but I have found a similar attitude at other colleges and universities. Typically, my students have had little experience writing outside of school; they see writing as irrelevant to real life; they slip into passivity and apathy without a blink; and they rely on restrictive compositions, such as the five-paragraph essay, that had worked for them in the past. On the first day of class, the students—usually all freshmen, eighteen or nineteen years old—clearly do not expect much. They have some hope that college writing will prove more engaging than the assignments they struggled with in high school, but, if not, they are prepared to do what I ask in order to pass the class and move on, if possible, never to write again. How, then, to get through to these students? How do I help them see writing as exciting, surprising, satisfying, empowering—if only so that they willingly undertake the hard work of revision needed to succeed as writers?

In a word, my answer is “play.” I woke to the possibilities of play several years ago when I faced a class similar in disposition to the one I just described. My first assignment was boilerplate for college composition: stake out an is-

sue and develop a set of arguments supporting a clear thesis. I helped prepare students for their task by modeling the essay, discussing process, and urging them to choose promising topics. But, for the most part, the early drafts were flat, even disjunctive. The students seemed more concerned with writing what I wanted to read rather than what they wanted to say. I was not surprised. This sort of compliant response is typical of novice writers and understandable too. They know where the power lies and what the consequences of straying too far from the instructor's expectations are. But I was frustrated. I knew that this attitude would yield only the slowest, most painful progress for many of the students. They would learn far more if they saw the possibilities of their writing for themselves and felt motivated to act upon them. On an impulse I asked students to break a rule in their next drafts. "Rule? What rule?" they asked. "I don't know," I replied. "What rules are you following?" That led to a discussion of rules they had always obeyed but never questioned: rules of grammar, punctuation, usage, formatting, and citation, but also implied rules of etiquette, style, voice, and audience. We talked about why these conventions exist and the many ways they could be transgressed. Grins started to appear in the room. These next drafts would be fun.

The energy and creativity the students put into their next drafts impressed me. Many had merely played with font and color, but others went further, writing in landscape view, in Spanish or Italian or Morse code. One student wrote his draft in a spiraling mobile; another spelled out his essay in macaroni pasted to cardboard; still another had scrawled part of her draft in pen across her stomach and performed her essay in a belly dance. And the subsequent drafts surpassed the early, more dutiful drafts. Most students had only edited and proofread their essays, as usual, but many had overhauled them, something not at all common. While the quality of the final products varied, the essays evinced a strength of voice that emerges only when a writer is intrinsically motivated to convey meaning. Was the play assignment responsible for this difference? The students seemed to think so. Later in the semester, several claimed that the assignment had caused them to think of their writing in a new light. Here is one reflection:

I found it very interesting, but extremely frightening. I like rules. I live happily with rules. My being forced to break the rules was like telling an ant to carry an elephant on it's [sic] back—difficult and stressful! . . . "The Crazy Essay," as I call it, opened me up to new ideas and the

fact that my writing does not have to be so strict. I felt as though it was okay to experiment with my drafts of this essay, made me realize that *my first draft does not have to be my final draft*. I have the authority to play around with my own writing. It was nice to have the freedom to experiment with different ideas and have it be “okay.” I had total control over my work. No one could really tell me it was wrong because there weren’t any “real rules” to follow. I could make up the rules as I went along. It was almost like my creativity had been set free after years of yearning [for] freedom. It was great. . . . At any rate, I have come to realize that “rigidness” ruins a paper. That stupid word reminds me of “rigor mortis,” reminds me of death. I guess it can be said that a rigid paper is a “dead paper.” (Emphasis in original.)

The heart of any composition instructor would lift at some of the ideas in this reflection. First, the student (I will call her Karen) claims that the exercise helped her realize that her first draft does not have to be her final draft. Most students I have taught resist this essential idea if it is presented as part of a lesson. They need to learn it on their own. By means of playful experimentation, Karen understands that revision is not only possible but crucial: “A rigid paper is a ‘dead paper.’”

Second, Karen reports she felt she had the “authority to play around with” her writing. As Carol Berkenkotter, Ann Penrose, Cheryl Giesler, and others have shown, much of the frustration and anxiety students experience as they make the transition into college life grows from their sense that they lack authority in their new lives.¹ To write with authority—what Karen calls “total control”—is a breakthrough every novice writer needs.

Finally, Karen expresses a joyfulness that she evidently has never associated with academic writing. She celebrates the “freedom to experiment with different ideas and have it be ‘okay.’” In sum, Karen has learned for herself that substantive revision is critical, that she has the authority and control to undertake this revision, and, perhaps most importantly, that she *wants* to revise, that she wants to experiment with ideas and refine her meaning. She is ideally positioned to improve rapidly as a writer.

The playful assignment had clearly yielded benefits I wanted to explore further. I had a number of questions: Would other student writers respond as did Karen and her classmates to similar assignments? How does this kind of assignment impart the sense of authority Karen reports? How does it help

others escape the rigidity she experienced as a writer? What quality of play caused her to experience the exercise as frightening at first? What is the role of the rules that seem central to her breakthrough as a writer? In other words, how does play and an attitude of playfulness potentially apply to the teaching of writing?

These questions touch upon the ideas of a number of play theorists, including Johan Huizinga, Mihai Spariosu, and Gregory Bateson.² But the kinds of play I have implemented in my composition classroom and curriculum are perhaps most fruitfully understood in the context of one theoretical framework in particular: British pediatrician, psychiatrist, and psychoanalyst, D. W. (Donald Woods) Winnicott's notion of play as "creative transformation" that takes place in a "potential space" between an individual's inner and outer realities.³ After I briefly outline Winnicott's theory and how it might be applied to composition pedagogy, I will describe how I implemented play strategies in my composition course and how Winnicott's theory has helped me make sense of the results.

A Framework for Play and Writing

For Winnicott, play represents a creative state of withdrawal from everyday life that begins in childhood, when an infant copes with the "immense shock of loss of omnipotence" by means of a transitional space between the illusion of omnipotence and external reality.⁴ The principal activity in this "third space" is play, often with "transitional objects," such as a blanket or a string. A transitional object is a special not-me possession that "symbolizes the union of two now separate things, baby and mother, at the point of time of the initiation of their separateness."⁵ Through the transformation of this object, through which the blanket is both a blanket and more than a blanket, the child creatively manages the strain of reconciling inner and outer realities. Thus "play is neither inside nor outside," but rather it serves as a bridge between inner and outer realities, partaking of the world and its reality principles but also invested with "dream meaning and feeling."⁶

Play addresses needs in children that do not go away as they grow up, Winnicott insists. He says adults need play, too: "It is assumed here that the task of reality acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience . . . which is not challenged (arts,

religion, etc.). This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child 'lost' in play.⁷⁷ Childhood play expands into "creative living and the whole cultural life of man."⁷⁸ Creative living is not a given, however; a person can be overwhelmed by the need to attend to the realities of environmental factors, leading to conformity and what Winnicott calls the "sick state" of compliance.

It is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living. Contrasted with this is a relationship to external reality which is one of compliance, the world and its details being recognized but only as something to be fitted in with or demanding adaptation. Compliance carries with it a sense of futility for the individual and is associated with the idea that nothing matters and that life is not worth living. In a tantalizing way many individuals have experienced just enough of creative living to recognize that for most of their time they are living uncreatively, as if caught up in the creativity of someone else, or a machine.⁹

The parallels between this passage and Karen's reflection are striking. Karen draws a similar distinction between an external, imposed reality of real rules, to which she felt she had to comply—one she associates with "rigor mortis"—and a playful state she identifies with freedom and creativity, in which she can "experiment with different ideas and have it be 'okay.'" The joyfulness of this state replaces the sense of futility Winnicott describes, which Karen associates with entrapment.

In the context of college composition, then, we can conceive of a potential space between what a student feels meaning to be—an inner, private, and not necessarily verbal knowing—and the discourses in which she attempts to articulate that meaning. Through play—the coping behavior in these potential spaces—the student learns to negotiate the conflicts and the overlaps between what she feels meaning to be and the rhetorical demands of social discourses, including writing. The texts then become transitional objects, infused with "dream meaning and feeling." When the writer experiences writing as play, she slips back and forth between inner and outer realities, partaking of both but unencumbered by the anxiety that leads to the "sick state" of rote compliance. This isn't to say that the writer at play does not experience some anxiety: Winnicott argues that, because play "is always on the theoretical line between the

subjective and that which is objectively perceived,” a sense of “precariousness” is an inherent feature of all play. Indeed, this precariousness is responsible for the excitement of play.¹⁰ In other words, an individual at play feels that something is at stake, but the accompanying anxiety is thrilling and motivating rather than debilitating.

Winnicott’s key insight, however, is that creativity is the essence of play, that play is creativity and creativity is play: “The essential feature of my communication is this, that playing is an experience, always a creative experience, and it is an experience in the space-time continuum, a basic form of living. . . . It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.”¹¹ Creativity and self are, of course, vexed terms in a postmodern era, but if we envision the writer at play creatively recombining and transforming discourses in order to negotiate a repertoire of selves that construct her perception of reality, we begin to see the potential of play as a means of teaching and learning writing.

Composition scholar Nancy Welch explores this potential in a writing-center context.¹² Interested in “the questions and meanings produced by the ‘rub’ of oppositions—between ideal visions and local conditions,” Welch sees a workable model for this interaction in Winnicott’s notion of potential space, where the individual negotiates identity in a “constant interplay of me-not-me, tradition and change.”¹³ Welch argues that the tutorial serves such a potential space, with creative apperception as the principal goal and with the assignment itself as a transitional object, open to question and creative transformation on the part of both tutor and student. With this strategy, Welch claims she works against the idea of academic writing as “joyless, empty, uncreative.”¹⁴ However, despite useful parallels between teacher and therapist, student and patient, Welch stresses that the tutor should not be seen as an analyst merely helping the student reconcile herself to language norms and the value system they inhere: “There *is* the ever-present danger of coopting psychoanalytical perspectives, especially Winnicott’s, in the service of a same old story: [a student] just needs to internalize and make part of herself what outside forces demand, and the tutor can be a helpful, gentle handmaid to this socializing process, make it seem like pleasant play.”¹⁵

Although a classroom situation is structurally different from a tutorial, Welch’s point applies to my project as well, because an individual lost in play may not be inclined to critically appraise the ramifications of her play. For example, a student playfully experimenting with street slang in an essay may

be perfectly aware she is bucking the norms of academic discourse, however vaguely she understands the nature of those norms. But unless she is prompted by an instructor, she is probably not likely to consider why slang is frowned upon in academia, or who is doing the frowning, or whose voices are silenced by disapproval. On the other hand, having committed the transgression (as opposed to being asked to speculate about it), the playful student is ideally positioned for such a sociopolitical analysis, especially if her instructor knows that playful discourse can subvert, dislocate, and transform hegemonies of every kind. The purpose of play in composition as I use it is not to reconcile students to the uncontestable conventions of a monolithic discourse community. On the contrary, it is to provide them with a psychic or “potential” space in which to explore—prod, distort, lampoon, mock, mimic, laugh at, profane, *play with*—these conventions and the ways they overlap and conflict with the students’ native discourses. In doing so, students find a means to negotiate the social roles at stake as they learn how to write in college.

Applying Play to College Composition

The use of play strategies in first-year writing pedagogy has a long history. In 1976, composition scholar Winston Weathers argued that alternative, playful methods of composing, what he calls Grammar B, can offer students a “refreshing, exciting experience.”¹⁶ The same year, Lynn Quitman Troyka described the absorption and enthusiasm that accompanies elaborate simulation games in her writing classroom.¹⁷ More recently, Albert Rouzie has shown how serio-ludic discourses can be employed successfully in the teaching of writing, particularly via electronic media.¹⁸ Still, the notions of play and, especially, fun carry a taint in composition studies. A relatively new field that only recently has achieved respectability may shy away from a subject that can be seen unacademic or frivolous. More disturbingly, compositionists may not think, deep down, that learning to write is (or should be) fun. Peter Elbow describes the strong reactions of a group of teachers to an essay that a student said he enjoyed writing: “What infuriated these teachers was not really the mediocre quality but that the writer said in a piece of process writing that the piece was easy and fun to write and that he didn’t revise it much because most people in this group liked it. I sensed resentment against the most basic impulses that are involved in being a writer: to have fun telling a story and to give pleasure to others.”¹⁹ Yet, as Elbow argues, by ignoring or suppressing the element of fun, we deny

students the pleasure that may motivate them to write for their own purposes. My claim is not that a pedagogy that makes use of laughter, joking, and games is necessarily novel or innovative, but rather that these and other forms of play should be recognized as central to how our students learn and that they should therefore figure more prominently in how we teach writing.

The three occasions of play I describe here come from a composition curriculum I designed that foregrounds the element of play in all aspects of the course, from in-class lessons and class conversations to writing assignments and composing exercises. On each occasion, I had a particular goal in mind for the play, although I understand that “end-gaining” (see below) play could defeat its purpose. In the first episode, I had students play with Play-Doh, the modeling compound, in the classroom. I intended the play to help students grasp that successful writing usually involves substantive revision and to persuade them that they are capable of making such revisions. In the second episode, I assigned a playful writing exercise intended to shed a critical light on writerly conventions, for example, on paragraphing and on syntax. This exercise also appeared to help students negotiate the complex social roles that emerge when a writer learns college discourses. Focusing on one student in particular, I argue, that a playful manipulation of the conventions of written discourse gave the student new ways to say things (and thus new things to say) and served to illuminate the ways she was positioned by language and ideology. In the third episode, I asked students to play with what language theorist Mikhail Bakhtin calls “authoritative discourse,” discourse the individual perceives as distant and static, and which, in a school setting, students tend to accept compliantly.²⁰ I discussed two examples in particular: the course syllabus and the Modern Language Association (MLA) documentation style, which students use to cite sources.²¹ By comparing their idealized (and not necessarily serious) versions of these texts to the official versions the students appeared to gain the authority to critique these official versions, and so to develop a more nuanced understanding of how best to use them. Following Winnicott in all three of these episodes, the object of our play—respectively, writing process, composing conventions, and the authoritative discourse—became “transitional objects” that the students creatively transformed in the “potential space” that play affords, infusing these objects with “dream meaning and feeling.”

My approach to developing the play element in composition was conditioned by the paradox at the heart of any effort to combine play (defined as creative transformation) and pedagogy. To be useful, play must be experienced, to a degree, as useless, or else it will not be play. As Arthur Koestler observes, “The degree of playfulness in an action decreases in proportion as the explor-

atory drive is adulterated by other drives.”²² This is not to say that play is always or completely useless; simply that it must not be dominated by goals other than itself. The trick, then, is to weigh purpose against purposelessness. Pay too much attention to the goals of play, and play does not happen; pay too little attention (or rather too little attention too often), and the time taken from serious activity can no longer be justified, by me or the students, which causes us to worry or grow impatient and ruin the play. To avoid this last danger—and because I *am* interested in how play can be used to achieve course objectives—I linked most play activities to pedagogical goals. But even in these scripted events, I allowed a wide margin for frivolity, silliness, and humorous tangents.

In other words, I was careful not to overly “end-gain” the play. Coined by dramatist F. M. Alexander, *end-gaining* describes our preoccupation with goals at the expense of the means we use to achieve them, which trains us to be present only in relation to goals. “When I go from my house to the grocer, I’m not present until I’m back at the house. Going from point A to point B we are in a kind of non-life, and from B to C the same. This is one of our earliest lessons . . . to be in relation to the goal. This teaches us to live in ‘absent time.’”²³ Alexander saw absent time on stage as a wasted opportunity for creation, and he sought to disrupt it by focusing the attention of actors on everyday habits, which are inherently end-gained. In the Alexander Technique, an actor is trained to check the psychophysical impulses behind habits. Handed a glass of water, for instance, she trains herself to not reach for it. When everyone around her sits down, she remains standing, and so on.

Importing Alexander’s ideas to the composition classroom, we can see play as the equivalent to the Alexander Technique in its emphasis on the means rather than the ends and on present time rather than absent time. Instead of focusing on the goal of, say, writing more complex sentences, the student plays with the means to that end—manipulating language, stretching it, making it do strange and humorous things. Paradoxically, by forgetting her goal or by letting it recede, the student at play may well achieve it more efficiently, in part because she is interacting more creatively with the present. When I introduced play activities into the course, I explained to the students the goals I wanted to achieve. But then I explicitly or implicitly invited them to play with the means I provided to achieve those goals.

Playing with the writing process

In this first instance of play, my goal was to persuade students that substantive revision is not only important but desirable if they want to convey their mean-

ing effectively. Major revision tends to be very difficult for first-year writing students. Composition scholar Nancy Sommers shows in her landmark study on revision that inexperienced writers make wholesale changes to their original drafts only reluctantly; to them, revision means minor sentence-level editing and proofreading.²⁴ I believed that play might loosen the kind of rigidity that my student Karen describes as making revision difficult. Indeed, rhetoricians David Kaufer and Gary Waller argue that first-year composition students are so wedded to unproductive, discursive practices that have worked for them in the past (or so the students believe) that enticing them to play may be the only way to get them to abandon these practices: "We prize our instruction as 'serious business,' and we can't easily fathom how 'playful' techniques can serve important functional ends . . . [but] in teaching processes as complex as reading and writing, we may have no alternative but to resort to fundamentally subversive techniques in order to teach students to read and write."²⁵ In order to dislodge students from the narrow focus on finishing the assignment, Kaufer and Waller propose that "we might teach our students to ruthlessly subvert their own (and our) discourse, to use 'play' (in both the mechanistic and ludic senses) in language in order to insert themselves creatively and effectively into the discourses that envelope them."²⁶

As part of a lesson on revision, I distributed Play-Doh to the students and invited them to play with it. I told students the purpose of the activity right away rather than simply encouraging them to play without explanation. I believe this move paradoxically gave them the freedom to play by restricting it. If they sensed they were supposed to be having fun, I think they would be reacted with apathy or disdain (the are-we-having-fun-yet? phenomenon). By my announcing a purpose, they could, so to speak, resist it in peace. The activity, I explained, was intended to illustrate the process of revision, in particular the idea that starting fresh or radically revising early drafts can often be the most efficient path to a successful essay. I wanted to make the point that the hard work that goes into a first draft isn't entirely lost when a writer chooses to start over or to let her draft fall apart. Like the Play-Doh after a sculpture is squished, the thinking that goes into a draft remains after the draft is transformed. The Play-Doh also suggested the malleability of writing, how it can be stretched, rolled, and molded—played with—an association most students said they had not made before the exercise.

As we played, we talked about our writing processes, often using the Play-Doh to make a point. For example, one student laid out the Play-Doh in several

sections to show the stages her writing typically went through. But for the most part, students made things—flowers, tennis racquets, jewelry, cups, little people—unrelated to the lesson, except insofar as these sculptures represented the creative process. By squishing their creations and making something new, the students were physically enacting my argument that they can let go of early drafts. Curiously, resistance to the lesson only reinforced the lesson or gave me opportunities to make a point about writing. For example, one student, a Christian who had often talked about his faith, sculpted a cross, which he refused to destroy. “It’s perfect as it is,” he said. I replied that sometimes it happens that what we write seems perfect the first time. I also pointed out that he was the only student who said he believed his sculpture came out perfect the first time. Neat homilies notwithstanding, I suspect students learned less from my didactic comments than the activity that illustrated them, in part because they seemed to *want* the activity to mean something. Given a toy to play with, the students seemed to feel implicitly challenged to respond like adults, with the maturity to laugh and joke but also to join me in constructing meaning. In fact, in reflections on this play episode, the few students who did not describe the episode as fun or enjoyable complained that it was pointless. Most others claimed they both enjoyed playing with the Play-Doh and learned something from the activity. I have no empirical data that showed students revised their subsequent drafts more substantively than is normal for the course, but judging from these reflections and postsemester interviews, this exercise, in combination with similar play activities, helped students see their writing and the writing process in a new light.

Playing with writerly identity

Of the several occasions I asked students to play directly with their writing, the most fruitful involved an assignment similar to the rule-breaking exercise that had delighted Karen and her classmates. The assignment invited students to break, bend, or transform any rule they chose. In fact, the assignment itself directed their attention to rule breaking: “Describe how to do something you’re not supposed to do.”²⁷ To prepare for the assignment, we practiced several Grammar B exercises proposed by Winston Weathers including labyrinthine sentences, lists, use of white space, crots (discrete fragments of different lengths), and double voice.²⁸ By asking students to play with features of writing such as transitions, syntax, spelling, and structure and to investigate alternatives to them, I hoped that they would see them as arbitrary rules that can be manipulated for effect

rather than as fixed rules that must be obeyed. I succeeded—at least to some degree. In class discussion and in writing-process logs, several students openly questioned conventions they had never thought to challenge. For example, after reading aloud an absurdly long sentence that he obviously took great pleasure in composing, a student asked, “Why do I keep writing such short sentences in my real essays?” Another student experimented in her next essay with collage (passages separated by white space with no overt transition). A third student worked metadiscourse into writing he did outside the class, interrupting a narrative with an authorial voice that challenged some of the ideas in the piece.

However, I believe the most significant impact of this play assignment involved how it appeared to help students reconcile the conflicts between familiar and new senses of self that emerge when a student first comes to college. In *Persons in Process*, Anne Herrington and Marcia Curtis link the difficulties students encounter in college to disharmonies in world view, but they see the transition to college not as a passive enculturation process but as an active construction of self on the part of the writer within the constraints of the discourses available.²⁹ In their long-term study of four college students, the authors find a private impulse within the academic writing of most students and a desire to be heard—to perform publicly—in even their most private writing. They see public and private discourses as inseparable parts of a whole, the whole that is the student’s multiple senses of self, which are “embedded, maintained, and learned by language.”³⁰ When students learn a new discourse, they inhabit new ways of thinking, knowing, and making sense of the world. Inevitably, this process involves permanent changes in the student’s values and their sense of self, changes that for some may be too extreme or too rapid. At least theoretically, play offers a space in which students can reconcile these inner and outer realities. Winnicott points to the centrality of identity negotiation in play: “It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.”³¹

For one student in particular, whom I will call Sally, the play assignment seemed to help in this discovery of self. Sally came to my class with a great deal of anxiety about her writing. The first in her family to attend college, Sally expressed ambivalence about her working-class background: “I grew up in Belfast, Maine all my life,” she wrote. “‘I was born and breed here,’ as some would say in my home town. . . . I love to do all the redneck activities such as four wheeling, fishing, trail riding and watching baseball games.” But she said she was “a little bit embarrassed about people reading my work.” She wrote in her letter of

introduction: “I have a lot of fears about English to be honest with you. This is the class I am most worried about because I have a bad Maine accent and I write the way I talk. . . . I’d say ‘ain’t’ and ‘wicked,’ and all that stuff, and sometimes I’m like, just like typing and, I’m like, ‘Oh, no! That’s not proper English!’”

Sally responded to the play assignment by laughing at the source of one of her fears, the fear that her accent would mark her as an outsider to academia. Her essay, entitled, “How to Be a Redneck,” is a Jeff Foxworthy–inspired piece of self-mockery.³² Here is the opening passage, written in multiple fonts, which Sally read aloud with great gusto to her classmates.

WELL, I GREW UP WITH A BUNCH OF MALE HICKS WHO LIKED TO GO OUT AT NIGHT AND HIT MAIL BOXES WITH EMPTY BEER BOTTLES FOR FUN. WHAT DOES THAT HAFTA TELL YA! Well, [it] ain’t easy being a red neck, theah certain rules ya hafta follow: An accent. You gotta have the mainah accent. It ain’t hard to do just don’t say youah R’s that’s all y’all. 2) **A BIG truck. Y’all don’t have [to have] a 454 to have a redneck truck. This is a beatah truck to go playing in the mud. She is all lifted with big mud terrain tiah. Oh won’t she go good.**

With this essay, Sally proudly—even joyfully—proclaims her identity as a redneck and implies that this identity does not preclude her from being a college student like any other college student. She has control over this accented voice. It is part of her but does not define her. Like so many students before her, Sally has successfully negotiated a dual role of academic outsider and insider, apparently by realizing that these roles are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Sally said later that she strongly believed that the essay should have been assigned earlier in the semester. The comments she wrote in her writing log express something of the excitement she felt about this essay, perhaps because, writing it, she had felt released from a fear that had inhibited her: “You’re on a roll and being creative and playing with fonts and stuff and you’re having a good time, and maybe the next essay you’d be, ‘Oh, man, I’ll have a good time with it and play with it a little bit.’ When you play with things a little bit more you’re more creative and open-minded about things. It just comes out to be more of a well-developed essay.”

By giving Sally an opportunity to laugh at her redneck accent, which she had feared would mark her as an academic outsider, the alternate-genre assign-

ment helped Sally reposition herself as someone who had control over, and even pride in, the way she talked. I should note that I did not reassure Sally that her accent was acceptable, a move that might have reasserted power relations by reinforcing the notion that an accent such as hers is something to worry about (why else the need for, and the granting of, acceptance?). Nor did I identify or name Sally's fear and suggest that she address it, which would have put me in the position of deciding which of her emotions were worth exploring. Rather, I offered up a *space* in which Sally and her classmates could break away from (and break down) expected ways of writing and thinking, a space in which to experience the exhilarating creativity that playful writing makes possible—in Sally's case, a space in which to laugh at the fears that had inhibited her writing. This power of play recalls Caryl Emerson's paraphrase of Bakhtin: "First, we cultivate laughter as a route to knowledge . . . you laugh, you cease to be afraid, you can then investigate, and there is no surer path to a self-confident humanism and control over one's resources, than this."³³

Playing with authoritative discourse

A student behavior common to virtually all first-year composition classes involves their compliant, passive response to texts—articles published in journals and magazines and course documents—all of which the student sees as non-negotiable.³⁴ Bakhtin describes these discourses as "authoritative."

The authoritative word . . . is organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. . . . It is given (it sounds) in lofty spheres, not those of familiar contact. Its language is a special (as it were, hieratic) language. It can be profaned. It is akin to taboo, i.e., a name that must not be taken in vain. . . . Therefore authoritative discourse permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it. It enters our verbal consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass; one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it. It is indissolubly fused with its authority.³⁵

As Penrose and Geisler's study shows, first-year students tend to read and cite such texts uncritically, seeing them as sources of incontestable knowledge rather than as sets of authored claims open to negotiation.³⁶ Peter Elbow aims to instill a irreverence in his students toward what he calls "key texts" by means

of a series of playful exercises he describes in “Breathing Life into the Text.”³⁷ By having students play with authoritative texts—reading them backwards, mimicking and parodying them, writing imaginatively along similar lines on their own—Elbow believes students begin to overcome the anxiety that blocks them from engaging actively with the readings: “I’ve learned that people are braver about jumping in if the spirit is playful,” he writes. “I want to allay nervousness and I actually enjoy getting away from a reverent stance—from an attempt to ‘do justice’ to the text.”³⁸ In this way, Elbow argues, students learn to unclench and see these texts as authored and open to more than a single, correct interpretation. By having students creatively transform authoritative knowledge through play, in what Welch calls “the ‘rub’ of oppositions” between the ideal and the real, I hoped that they would recognize how this knowledge is built around a set of negotiable claims.³⁹ They could thus evaluate, challenge, extend, and otherwise work with these claims, rather than merely accept and reproduce them mechanically.

Like many college instructors, my practice is to pass out the course syllabus on the first day of class and discuss policies and expectations. In the past, students would accept this document passively, asking few questions. Only later in the semester, when the policies and expectations were enacted, did students realize their implications, often to their chagrin. For example, students often were unaware of my attendance policy until they had accumulated too many absences to pass the class. I wanted them to feel some ownership of this document, which, after all, amounted to a contract they were acquiescing to with their silence. Toward this end, before I discussed my own plans for the class, I invited students, working in small groups, to design their own perfect course. I did not say that the ideas had to be serious, but I did say that I would consider incorporating into the real syllabus any ideas that we as a class, after discussion, deemed worthwhile. Students, then, could offer earnest suggestions, but they also had the chance to play with what they expected my course to look like, as well as poke fun at their own ideals for a first-year composition course.

For the most part, the students offered serious ideas, many of which, such as conferences and peer response, were already part of my syllabus. But other proposals were offered (and received) in jest, to judge from the wide smiles all around: one single, semester-length essay; peer grading, no grading at all, optional classes, regular coffee breaks, and so on. Interestingly, these playful suggestions prompted much more useful debate than the serious ones. For example, peer grading brought up pertinent issues of power in the traditional

classroom, such as who gets to judge whom in what circumstances. When I said peer grading might be a plausible idea in one class, a spirited conversation broke out, alternating rapidly in tone between joking and serious. By treating the serious (the course design) frivolously, and the frivolous (the ludic proposals) seriously, we actively reevaluated our assumptions about what is possible in a composition course. Why not regular coffee breaks? What's wrong with a single, lengthy essay instead of five or six short ones? Is grading really necessary? The more outlandish or facetious the proposal, the more animated (and instructive) our ensuing discussion became. In the next class session when I handed out my syllabus, which had incorporated several of their ideas—such as allowing students to choose their own peer groups—the students read it over with the interest of ownership. To them, the document represented a negotiated (and negotiable) contract, not a dictated set of rigid rules.

In the second game, later in the semester, I again asked students to play with the ideal and the real. This time the subject (or rather the object) was documentation style, with which most students were only minimally familiar. After discussing the purpose of any citation system, I broke students into small groups and asked them to come up with their own methods of citing sources. To add some zest to the game, we made it into a competition. The group that came up with the best system, by vote of their peers, would decide what to do with the second half of the following class. The documentation systems the groups came up with, much like the syllabus ideas, mixed the serious and the ludic. Many of them replaced the parenthetical citation with an icon (such as faces with various expressions) or a color to denote the different sources. Others, such as one using hypertext links, located the full bibliography of a source where it appears in the text of a paper (“You have to read the paper online,” the group explained). All of the proposed styles had their merits and flaws, which the students vigorously debated. When we turned to the real system, its own set of virtues and shortcomings stood out clearly, and students did not shy away from pointing out the superior aspects of their own inventions, which made for many teachable moments. Here again, rather than passively acquiescing to nonnegotiable knowledge, students transformed the knowledge (or rather their construction of it), through play, into knowledge in which they had a stake and a sense of authority. So when I presented a version of that knowledge, they were positioned to critique it in light of the alternatives they themselves had developed.

Conclusion

According to Winnicott, play is an activity that takes place in a “potential space” between an individual’s inner life and objective reality. In this transitional space, activity and objects are creatively transformed in a process through which the individual reconciles dissonance between inner and outer worlds. Creative transformation involves identity negotiation, an interplay of me-not-me that is inherently ambiguous, exciting, and precarious and stands in direct contrast to the sick state of compliance, when one feels “as if caught up in the creativity of someone else, a machine.”⁴⁰

These characteristics of play have implications for composition pedagogy. Given opportunities to play with virtually every aspect of a writing course, students stand to gain in a number of ways. First, in play, the student would have access to a “potential space” to negotiate disparities between her sense of self and the demands of her new environment, disparities that Herrington and Curtis and others have argued are responsible for the struggles many students experience in making the transition to college. Second, by creatively interacting—playing—with discourse that students might view as incontestable and learn compliantly (or not at all), students would transform that knowledge into discourse in which they feel they have a stake and a sense of authority. Third, students thus would be positioned to critique authoritative discourse, as well as conventions of form and style. Finally, play is fun. By associating writing with enjoyment, challenge, and excitement, students would gain the motivation to write on their own and the confidence to take risks with their writing that they otherwise might have avoided.

With these potential applications in mind, I developed a curriculum for a first-year composition course that foregrounds the element of play. In this essay, I have described three occasions when I invited students, through play, to creatively transform the object at hand. On the first occasion, students sculpted with Play-Doh while discussing the writing process. On the second, students played with their own writing, manipulating and challenging writerly conventions. On the third occasion, students played with authoritative discourse, discourse (in this case the course syllabus and the MLA documentation style) that is seen as incontestable. On all three occasions, the activity of play appeared to help students see aspects of their writing and learning in a new light and supplant an attitude of compliance, which Winnicott calls a

sick state, with creative apperception, defined by Winnicott as a basic form of living. These findings suggest that pedagogies of play deserve a greater role in writing classrooms.

NOTES

1. Carol Berkenkotter, "Student Writers and Their Sense of Authority over Texts," *College Composition and Communication* 35 (1984):312–19; Ann M. Penrose and Cheryl Geisler, "Reading and Writing without Authority," *College Composition and Communication* 45 (1994):505–20. See also Patricia Bizzell, "Power, Authority, and Critical Pedagogy," *Journal of Basic Writing* 10 (1991):54–70; Peter Elbow, *Writing Without Teachers*, 2nd ed. (1998); Andrea A. Lunsford, *Writing Matters: Rhetoric in Public and Private Lives* (2007).

2. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1950, first pub. 1938); Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972); Mihai I. Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse* (1989).

3. D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (1971).

4. *Ibid.*, 71.

5. *Ibid.*, 97.

6. *Ibid.*, 95, 51 (emphasis in original).

7. *Ibid.*, 13.

8. *Ibid.*, 102.

9. *Ibid.*, 65.

10. *Ibid.*, 50.

11. *Ibid.*, 54.

12. Nancy Welch, "Playing with Reality: Writing Centers after the Mirror Stage," *College Composition and Communication* 51 (1999):51–69.

13. *Ibid.*, 57, 51.

14. *Ibid.*, 60.

15. *Ibid.*, 63.

16. Winston Weathers, "Grammars of Style: New Options in Composition," *Freshman English News* 4 (1976):17.

17. Lynn Quitman Troyka and Jerrold Nudelman, *Taking Action: Writing, Reading, Speaking, and Listening Through Simulation Games* (1975).

18. Albert Rouzie, *At Play in the Fields of Writing: A Serio-Ludic Rhetoric* (2005). See also the Fall 2008 issue of *Computers and Composition* for articles on how video and computer games have been used to teach literacy.

19. Peter Elbow, "Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues," *College English* 53 (1991):135–55.

20. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (1981), 259–422.
21. Modern Language Association, "The *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* and the *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing*," http://www.mla.org/style_faql.
22. Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (1964, first pub. 1961), 510.
23. Joseph Chaikin, *The Presence of the Actor* (1991, first pub. 1972), 34.
24. Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," *College Composition and Communication* 31 (1980):378–88.
25. David Kaufer and Gary Waller, "To Write Is to Read Is to Write, Right?" in *Writing and Reading Differently: Deconstruction and the Teaching of Composition and Literature*, ed. G. Douglas Atkins and Michael L. Johnson (1985), 69.
26. *Ibid.*, 68.
27. This exercise is adapted from John Schultz, *Writing from Start to Finish: The "Story Workshop" Basic Forms Rhetoric-Reader* (1990, first pub. 1982), 23.
28. Weathers, "Grammars of Style," 1–18. See also Wendy Bishop, ed., *Elements of Alternate Style: Essays on Writing and Revision* (1997).
29. Anne J. Herrington and Marcia Curtis, *Persons in Process: Four Stories of Writing and Personal Development in College* (2000).
30. *Ibid.*, 35.
31. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 54.
32. For a sample of Jeff Foxworthy's humor, see his web site at <http://www.jefffoxworthy.com>.
33. Caryl Emerson, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin* (1997).
34. In a longitudinal study of writing at Harvard University, Nancy Sommers found working with sources to be one of the most difficult tasks for all undergraduate students, not just freshmen. See Nancy Sommers, "Across the Drafts: Responding to Student Writing—A Longitudinal Perspective" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, San Francisco, CA, March 16–19, 2005).
35. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 342–43.
36. Penrose and Geisler, "Reading and Writing without Authority."
37. Peter Elbow, "Breathing Life into the Text," in *When Writing Teachers Teach Literature*, ed. Art Young and Toby Fulwiler (2000), 360–71.
38. *Ibid.*, 363, 368.
39. Welch, "Playing with Reality," 57.
40. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 65.