Essential questions

Why cultivate playful approaches to learning?
What does learning through play look like?
How can educational technology facilitate learning through play?

Introduction.
As we step further into an “age of wonder” characterized by technology and digital media (Tan, 2015), educators recognizing the need for an approach to learning which goes beyond mere content are exploring pedagogical techniques seldom implemented in the tradition bound halls of secondary and higher education. Twenty-first century students need to be able to generate new ideas and create novel ways to solve problems; combining the resources of the digital age classroom with attitudes of play can help students synthesize information and experiences to achieve these lofty goals.

As always when considering deviation from traditional practices, questions arise. The purpose of this chapter is to help those hoping to educate beyond content through the integration of educational technology and attitudes of play to define the practice of play and articulate the potential benefits of such an approach, describe what attitudes of play look like in practice and exploration, and identify how educational technology facilitates attitudes of play.

What is play, and why should we care?

It is perhaps easiest to understand play by setting it opposite our understanding of work. Take a moment to consider your average work or school day. What drives your choices and actions? Which criteria determine whether or not you can claim success? What governs how you spend your time?

(picture of upside-down clock from ETC Research Lab)

Most likely, you would describe a day in which success is defined by linear progression through tasks designed to reach a specific purpose. Your choices and actions were driven by the need to achieve this success, either to satisfy a personally set goal or to accomplish a compulsory goal set for you by someone else. Ideally, you were provided with the resources necessary to accomplish the specific purpose, and your time was devoted to applying those resources as previously determined. Play is quite the opposite; in fact, taking such an approach to play will neutralize its benefits. How, then, do we define this ambiguous term with which most are familiar but whose practice in education and industry few truly understand?

Play is defined primarily in terms of intent. Rather than being a goal-oriented pursuit whose conclusion is predictable and measurable, play is a non-linear “quest for experience” (Ward, 2009, p. 164), a journey through which the process of experimentation and exploration is
more important than the outcome itself (Ward, 2009). Play can appear purposeless, is voluntary, and takes place apart from “the ordinary” (Eberle, 2014) (Eberle, 2014, p. 215). Playful attitudes find joy and transformation in the process, and are not guided by planned “external material gain or profit” (Harrison & West, 2014, p. 93). Playful practices incorporate “anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, and strength” (Eberle, 2014, p. 214), as efficiency is “put on the back burner” (Ward, 2009) in favor of voluntary, freely chosen activities. Play involves both rule-making and rule-breaking, as might be remembered from the noisy negotiations of neighborhood games (Eberle, 2014), and can alternate between rigid adherence to agreed upon expectations and mischievous deviation from those same expectations. Truly bringing the definition of play into focus is challenging, and the borders are hazy (Eberle, 2014); according to Huizinga, calling it instinct says nothing, while calling it “mind or will” says “too much” (Eberle, 2014, p. 218). A summary might simply assert that play is not a product, but is a “creative, embodied” activity which “unfolds in its own right” (Harrison & West, 2014, p. 93).

Given a hazy understanding of play and an awareness of the difficulty of measuring the success of this non-product driven practice, stakeholders may question the value of such non-goal oriented activities, placing educators and learning designers in the challenging position of having to articulate the benefits of an intangible practice. The benefits, however, are clear. People employing attitudes of play show increase in intrinsic motivation (Eberle, 2014; Harrison & West, 2014; Ward, 2009). Incorporation of playful approaches develops creative skills (Davies, Jindal-Snape, Collier, Digby, Hay, & Howe, 2013; Randolph, Kangas, Ruokamo, & Hyvonen, 2016; Ward, 2009). Innovation and strategic thinking are improved (Harrison & West, 2014; Lotts, 2016; Schultz, Geithner, Woelfel & Kryzwinski, 2015), and as participants learn to cope with the complex environments of play they experience reduced levels of anxiety when presented with challenges and opportunities (Davies et al., 2011; Harrison & West, 2014; Lotts, 2016; Schultz et al., 2015; Ward, 2009 Lotts, 2016). Although the practice of play may need to be re-learned, it is inherent to human nature; having identified the benefits of learning through play, it is a short jump to incorporation of this practice with which all are innately familiar (Broadbend & van der Aalsvoort, 2009).

What does learning through play look like?

Christopher Ward (2009) integrated playful approaches and educational technology into a secondary level music composition unit. As part of the playful approach, Ward orchestrated an classroom atmosphere which was informal, relevant, interesting, and enthusiastic (Ward, 2009). The classroom was “multi-levelled” (Ward, 2009) and the content was open-ended and, true to play, had a relatively undefined purpose (Harrison & West, 2014; Ward, 2009). Ward maintained a spirit of fun through intentionally interesting, enthusiastic delivery of content (Ward), and maintained a flexible environment in which students experienced little pressure and were allowed to work at their own pace (Davies et al., 2013; Ward, 2009).

To preserve the low pressure, flexible environment, Ward encouraged students to be guided by Miles Davis’ admonition not to fear mistakes, as “there are none” (Ward, 2009 p.
Given this opportunity put aside a fear of failure (Farmers) and with nontraditional creation valued as different rather than labeled as wrong, students were free to imagine, innovate, and take risks in exploring new solutions (Farmers, Ward, 2009). Ward found that within this playful approach his students eschewed provided help sheets choosing, rather, to “experiment until something happened that they liked” (Ward, 2009, p. 163). Environments embracing playful attitudes toward learning will embrace growth through the journey, and see value in process which progress and unfold at different rates (Eberle, 2014). Practice will “transcend theory, appraisal and performance” (Ward, 2009, p. 154), as learners embrace the “wandering nature of play” (Eberle, 2014, p. 219) through a “series of connected events” (Eberle, 2014, p. 220). This is evidenced in Ward’s recounting that many “children who created great work were frequently unable to describe their methods in detail” (Ward, 2009, p. 163).

DeBeer completed an autoethnographic study exploring the role of play in design. DeBeers a jewelry designer, suspected the ‘rigidly imposed design process’ (deBeer, 2016, p. 98) imposed upon his jewelry design disallowed play and thus impaired the creativity of his work (deBeer, 2016). As part of his study, deBeer intentionally set free his playful self, giving himself permission to brainstorm. This “playful self” (de Beer, 2016)(deBeers, 2016) engaged in process by creating many test pieces incorporating new ideas, some of which worked and some of which did not (deBeer, 2016, p. 106). This “freewheeling approach” (deBeer, 2016, p. 107) felt adventurous to deBeers as he embraced the nonlinear aspects of play in the creative process (deBeer, 2016). His work became divergent as he developed the ability to “tolerate ambiguity” in his creative process (deBeer, 2016, p. 11). Although jewelry design is inherently product focused, having identified the creative benefits of playful attitudes deBeer determined to continue to make space for play by focusing on the process, idea generation, and creating prototypes in materials different than would be used in the final product (deBeer, 2016).

Play is a “unique and significant type of human activity” (Harrison & West, 2014), through which interaction with others requires “mutuality and sensitivity” (Eberle, 2014, p. 224). Relationships and power structures are rearranged as social groups construct knowledge and traditions unique to the community of play (Eberle, 2014, Harrison & West, 2014). Ward intentionally redefined his role as teacher to be one of group member and helper, and throughout the playful project his students grew to see themselves as a team (2009). The flexible nature of rules as enacted in playful practice helped students develop their poise and composure as they grew confident in their ability discern each others’ intentions and resolve conflict (Eberle, 2014).

Although we have examined play in opposition to work, play techniques can be employed to fulfill worklike objectives (Statler, Heracleous, & Jacobs, 2011). Work or classroom environments can afford themselves of the recursive, engaging and fun aspects of play through practices chosen deliberately to trigger playful attitudes (Harrison & West, 2014; Lotts, 2016; Statler et al., 2011). These “play cues” (Harrison & West, 2014, p. 71) incorporate things and processes not generally associated with the workplace or classroom (Statler et al., 2011). These signals, perhaps snacks or toys (Harrison & West, 2014), blur work and play releasing participants to ‘behave in new ways’ (Harrison & West, 2014, p. 75) without disconnecting them.
from the realities and responsibilities of product oriented endeavors (Davies et al., 2013; Farmers).

How can educational technology facilitate attitudes of play?

Educators in this “age of information and innovation” (Randolph et al., 2016, p. 418) live in a digital culture in which access to new technology heightens the importance of partnering information with “playful and creative thought” (Randolph et al., 2016, p. 419). As resources continue to become more intuitive and easier to use, educators and designers are free to consider not just what the resources can do, but what the resources can do for their students. Educational technology can facilitate playful exploration, liberating creativity and empowering interactive thinkers.

Ward (2009) considered the integration of educational technology into his class’ playful venture into music composition essential to his students’ creative process. The technology’s ability to recode symbols and sounds allowed students to depart from traditional compositional techniques and use sound differently than would be possible in the fixed tonal environment of Western musical instruments. Equipped with catalysts such as the sound of a running motorcycle engine, students playfully broke the traditional definition of music, confidently creating without tonal boundaries to compose with “texture rather than pitch” (Ward, 2009, p. 155). The instant feedback provided by the digital technology improved students’ intrinsic motivation and allowed them to embrace and capitalize upon even unintentional creative actions (Ward, 2009). Playful use of digital technology allowed students to escape curricular and cultural limitations, overcoming their preconceived understanding of what constituted the making of music. Given permission to approach their compositions playfully, Ward found the students less likely to blindly accept compositional norms, expressing their own ideas in discussions and evaluations.

Educational technology provides an effective platform for experimenting with playful practices. Consider a digital resource for either your personal or your students’ playful exploration. What cues might help facilitate a playful approach? Will you establish or define a clear, measurable goal? Why or why not? As you continue your playful exploration, consider what challenges to playful approaches might be present in a structured learning environment. How could those challenges be addressed? The promised benefits of play in helping students develop skills and strategies beyond mere content suggest it is worthwhile to consider ways in which to use educational technology to blend playful practices into a goal-oriented educational environment.

Conclusion

Resources of the digital age classroom can combine with attitudes of play to help students push beyond content to generate new ideas and practice novel problem-solving strategies. This chapter has defined and identified the benefits of play, articulated what attitudes of play look like
in practice and exploration, and identified ways in which educational technology can facilitate attitudes of play. Educators hoping to facilitate “improvisation, innovation, and experimentation” (Farmers) can confidently and effectively do so through the integration of educational technology and playful practices.

References


