

What Else to Unlearn?

Editorial



I think a lot about the things in teaching that we take for granted – traditions and conventional wisdom that are true because they always have been true. I’ve also been thinking how much some of these “truths” crumble when they are held up to research-based examination. One of the more recent topics that has made me reconsider my beliefs is play, an experience I’d like to share.

Some time ago, I watched [“Stuart Brown says play is more than fun”](#) with colleagues. Brown’s work is fascinating. He proposes that play is essential to live a healthy life and that our cultural understanding is quite flawed. We are culturally programmed to think, “live (or work) to play,” but Brown makes it clear from his research that we really *must* “play to live.” After watching, our assignment was to complete a table that compared what we used to know about play, what we now know about play, and what it now means for our practice. By doing so, we were forced to consider Brown’s research in light of what it means for education and, ultimately, what must be done in our practice. By participating in the activity, teachers are really forced to do one of two things, either refute (or disprove) Brown, or examine their practice to align it

with Brown’s findings. Of course a third way of “take no action” is also a possibility.

Teachers were blown away by the implications of play for their practice; we had a full on dialog! There were some great points made and some brilliant insights. This is an exceptional group of teachers and I was lucky to be able to work with them. One particularly brilliant insight was the fact that North American (and perhaps Western) culture has such a narrow and unhealthy definition about “play” and “fun.” We seem

from a student conversation, something about an unsafe (and illegal) level of intoxication that was experienced over some weekend festivity.

Some examples of this limited cultural scope of play in our culture are:

[Kid Rock](#)

[Katy Perry](#)

[The Hangover](#)

As a culture, we can’t even talk about play unless we are either under the age of 8, wealthy enough to have “earned” the right to play, or it involves being inebriated. We

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to think that play is for children and fun is a special time that must be planned well in advance. The negative connotations of play are well established in our vocabulary: “stop playing around and get to work!” They are also well formed in the protestant work ethic that is the foundation of [North] American culture. To go one step further, as a society, we are to the point that fun for adults *must* consist of alcohol and a tropical destination. This cultural message is not lost on our youth. Many teachers can say they’ve overheard that #wishineverknew statement

see play as the opposite of work and we sometimes associate it with doing nothing that is challenging at all. I could never capture the irony of adult (and perhaps some teen) “fun” better than [Bill Cosby](#)’s famous standup routine.

Enter Stuart Brown! Dr. Brown’s research blows a hole in our conventional wisdom about play. Play is necessary and it takes many forms, and we simply *must* engage in it at all stages of life or face dire mental (and one would assume physical) consequences. Dr. Brene Brown takes this a bit

Matt Rosati

Matt has been editor of *English Practice* and a member of the BCTELA executive for four years. This edition will be his final journal as editor.

further in [her book](#), in which she states that play is an essential aspect of Whole-hearted living. She adds that a mid-life crisis is actually the universe telling you that you are living an inauthentic life. From that one can extrapolate, a life without sufficient play. [Csikszentmihayli's Flow Theory](#) is all about play. The state of flow is a state of play. Because our cultural view of play is so narrow, we miss the connection every time. Video games may be seen as the exception to this. They are certainly engaging flow and they are certainly engaging play, but there is still quite a controversy about the *value* of video game play to a productive life -- once again, a cultural intolerance to certain versions of play.

Perhaps the humanities may have been hinting about play all along, yet, as a culture, we are not receptive to hear it (it may now be almost like a foreign language to us). H.D. Thoreau wrote, "most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them." Is the "song" play? I have usually seen the context of this Thoreau quote being that of unfulfilled dreams or a yearning, but aren't all of those things actually versions of play -- something fulfilling that you love to do?

Thomas Gray, a person apparently quite depressed himself, wrote in the *Elegy*, "Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid/ Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;/ Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway'd./ Or wak'd to ecstasy the living lyre." That "celestial fire" and "ecstasy" were forms of play. Those who have captured the moods and identity of our culture, i.e., the artists, have used "the unfulfilled life" or "deep longing" as major themes in their

work -- clearly, these are related to play, or the lack thereof. For myself, I am trying to redefine the things that I enjoy doing as play. I am also trying to acknowledge the things I do that are play, in its widest form, without shame or embarrassment. I really enjoy building learning communities with students, being part of the discovery that goes with a good focus question, and engaging in dialogs with other teachers about our profession and practice. Sometimes people will tell me that I am very dedicated or that I seem to really work a lot. I've always shrugged off these statements because so much of my work *is* play. When I'm talking with teachers or writing a blog or checking out a new technology, I am in flow. Suddenly it is midnight and I must stop. I'm lucky, most of my work *is* part of my play -- I must start to say that proudly and acknowledge it openly.



As a young teacher, play was the opposite of work and it had no place in my classroom. Learning was not pleasurable and its rewards came later. How wrong I was to subject those young people to such a philosophy. Of course, it held dire consequences for me too. I had a rule, and I often told colleagues of this rule when they were getting a bit "wild in the

eyes." "don't sign or agree to anything during May or June." Those were the bewitching months and those were the times that we as teachers would do anything to not continue what we were doing ("you're offering me a job as a lion-tamer for next fall and I can skip the training? I'll take it! So long, suckers!). I used to bet with another colleague about which staff member would "lose it" during those last remaining weeks.

What I know now is that we were all badly needing to play, but we had equated play with small children and the shiftless. The need to play had manifested itself in our surly relationships with each other and our students -- we just held on! That was many years ago. Now, almost all of my teaching is play for me, but I need to make that play ubiquitous and feel safe proudly proclaiming it. As teachers, we need to acknowledge a larger scope of play

and fun as a necessity to life. We need to consider the work of Brown and others like Seymour Papert as guiding principles. We must bring Papert's

"[Hard Fun](#)" and meaningful fun, like the kind expressed by [Henry Jenkins](#), into our classrooms and our lives as a legitimate part of sustaining those lives. I now know that play is for everyone -- the senior literature teacher must incorporate play into a lesson as much as the kindergarten teacher, Stuart Brown makes this clear. To return to my initial query, what

other things do we need to unlearn in order to help our students and ourselves?

This marks the end of my story about how play has shifted a paradigm for me. I urge you to explore some of the “truths” that you have accepted and subscribed to in your practice. On the topic of endings, this edition of the *English Practice* marks the end of my position as editor. I have had four meaningful years in this position and I have enjoyed working with some of the finest professionals – the experience has been transformational for me. *English Practice* has gone through many

changes, the biggest of which has been from a print journal to a dynamic online resource. I wish my successors all the best and I know that their fresh eyes will take the journal far. Thank you for your readership. I hope this publication has helped you better recognize and align your values and practice.

Best Wishes,
Matt Rosati

