

INJECTING PLAY AND REALITY INTO EDUCATION OF THE GIFTED

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In *Homo Ludens* (Man the Player), Huizinga traces the origin and development of the play element in culture:

By some the origin and fundamentals of play have been described as a discharge of superabundant vital energy, by others as the satisfaction of some "imitative instinct," or again as simply a need for relaxation. According to one theory play constitutes a training of the young creature for the serious work that life will demand later on. . . .

Huizinga observes that all these hypotheses have one thing in common: they all start from the assumption that play must serve something which is *not* play, that it must have some kind of biological purpose.

You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but no play.

He concludes that play is universal, permeating every feature of life. Its roots can be traced to the myths and rituals of prehistory.

EDUCATION WITHOUT PLAY

If play is so natural and universal, why does organized education tolerate it only in preschool and kindergarten? Why is play progressively dissociated from the teaching process as the learner advances through school?

I watched my child enter the schoolyard on her first few days of kindergarten. She and her sad-faced companions voluntarily lined up before the classroom door waiting for the bell to sound. Around them were the tumbling, laughing upper-graders who knew it was perfectly all right to enjoy themselves. A secret voice had told the newcomers their days of play and exuberance were all over. What was that unspoken message that had separated them from the players? In a few days, happily, the newcomers joined the others and all became well.

Who will deny that teaching becomes increasingly grim business as the learner becomes older. There is "class" and "play," but never the twain shall meet. Nevertheless the irrepressible urge to play breaks through with secretly passed tic-tac-toe games and fleetingly made "faces" and gestures. At higher grade levels there is unending teasing, practical joking, and "horsing around."

Could the excision of play from learning account for many of organized education's problems? Skeptics will point to an earlier time when there were neither play nor problems - the era of spare the rod, spoil the child. But we have passed the dark age of child labor, speak only when spoken to, and other abominations of the time.

EDUCATION WITHOUT REALITY

Beside denying, or at best tightly rationing, play, organized education also systematically prohibits reality. I have never known a child who accepted school as naturally as one accepts family, friends, and neighborhood. To the child, school *must* be an artificiality, an anomaly that intrude into real life. School is something to be contended with for a future reward in the dimly perceived future. For the present, however, real life is on this side of the wall and school is on the other.

Not so long ago children began school already having learned a great deal through real-life influences of the family, home, and neighborhood. That learning came from doing important, meaningful chores, helping the family to earn its livelihood, and visiting many relatives. Today those influences have been replaced by others including babysitters, television, and young peers with their respective views of reality.

Only in primitive societies do children still learn from elders who teach them to hunt, plant, and count in "real life" where the payoff is real and immediate. Failure to bait a trap correctly means you do not eat today.

Young apprentices in earlier times had no difficulty associating tailoring, stonemasonry, or account-keeping with real life. No one taught them *about* life: they lived it. Learning and applying learning went together very naturally.

Organized education in modern society kidnaps learners at an

early age. It insulates them and keeps them in a place that has no resemblance to home, neighborhood streets, or surrounding countryside. Finally it releases them to re-enter the real world with a parchment certifying they are ready for re-entry.

Most of the attacks against organized education stem from its failure to prepare young people for life. How could it do so considering its form and function? Educators have of course been trying to make education more "relevant", but I know of no successes except where the learners have been allowed to leave the process earlier than previously.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Why is organized education so devoid of reality. Why does it deny the universal instinct of play? Perhaps it is because "the medium is the message." Modern education is designed to convey the contents of books to the masses through "methods" and "programs". This translates to small numbers of teachers imparting ideas in books to vast numbers of children who *know* something is very unnatural about the whole process but are powerless to do anything about it. Actually they can do something about it: they can (and do) refuse to go along with the charade. Someday it will be realized that the clients' rejection of its artificiality is the main cause of organized education's failures. Could this be why career education has been so widely accepted?

The old model of organized education, with its creaking, buckling structure seemed to work in another age, but it has started to fail us. Children are no longer faceless, compliant slaves who will bow to the headmaster. They simply no longer fit into the system. While we wait for redesign of the basic structure to begin there are things we, as individuals, can do to help speed progress.

MEDIA FOR INJECTING PLAY AND REALITY INTO LEARNING

Learning games and simulations may be the most powerful means of tapping and releasing the potential in gifted children. These media are *made* for gifted because they accommodate and exercise the child's superior creativity, imagination, wide-ranging interests and abilities, and limitless energy. Unlike other media, which begin and end with themselves, learning games and simulations are ideally suited for the learner who thrives on discovery and endless testing of ideas.

Surprisingly few teachers of gifted, however, have used these media. Simple learning games are used in primary grades, as might be expected. Teachers at higher grade levels cannot find the kinds of simulations they need, or in many cases cannot take the time to administer them. Teachers of English, math, and science have difficulty finding learning simulations in their fields. Most commercial simulations and simulation-games are in the social studies area and deal with group decision-making processes. Many of these are complicated and time-consuming, especially in preparation.

As teachers of gifted know, very little material is published specifically for the field. The reason is strictly economic. If a school district's budget for classroom materials is about 1 % of the total, with gifted materials coming out of that, then about 0.0003 of the total is available for gifted. Large publishers have not entered this small market.

A teacher has the choice of either searching for commercial learning games and simulations or designing original ones. While original design is both challenging and time-consuming, once a basic idea is worked out the game or simulation usually takes shape quickly. Children should be invited to assist. Probably they will not be able to aid with the basic design (which is usually a one-person job), but they can help with such ancillary materials as card decks, look-up tables, reference information, boards, etc.

EXAMPLES OF LEARNING SIMULATIONS THAT MODEL REALITY

The Game-Sim(tm) Series 1 program of California Learning Simulations has many reality-based learning simulations that have been used successfully with gifted in grades 5 through 7. Imaginative teachers can readily draw ideas from Game-Sim (tm) and design their own variations of the following simulations for both lower and higher grades:

Planning a New Town - Supply blank maps, map symbols, pencils, erasers, and rules. Furnish a list of sound environmental planning criteria. assign students to work in teams of two or three to a map. Hand out "memoranda" indicating what is to be done, but tell the teams they are competing. When all town plans are completed, invite the teams to give presentations. Conclude with a vote to select the best town plan, stressing that good ecological planning and originality should be rewarded.

Nutty Inventors Meeting - Invite two "nutty inventors" volunteers to sit at the front of the room. Provide them with notes on a device they have just invented (telephone, airplane, hot water bottle) and have them develop arguments supporting development and application of their invention. Set the time as a few years before the invention was actually made. Have the audience of potential "investors" question the inventors very critically on the value of their ideas. After a few minutes end the exchange and call for a vote to accept or reject the invention. Repeat this for several inventions, inviting students to volunteer as inventors.

Criminal Investigator - Write ten to 20 "witness accounts" to a crime. Prepare graphics, maps, "mug shots," fragments of evidence, etc. Write the accounts to give conflicting testimony, flagrant errors, etc. but with enough information for the perpetrator(s) to be identified unequivocally. Distribute the accounts and ask the students to solve the crime. Occasionally intervene and offer help in systematizing the analysis, but encourage the "investigators" to work out the solution by themselves.

The above activities draw on the gifted child's capacity to think abstractly, be creative, and delve deeply below surfaces. They furthermore allow the student to test and apply what he already knows. Organized education tends to compartmentalize learning, refuses to accept the confusion in learning, and spins its wheels trying to "straighten things out". It seldom allows students to *apply* what has been learned except in single-skill-subject tests.

Gaming/simulation can accommodate the wide range of individual differences among gifted children and allow everyone to work with what resources he or she can bring to bear. Instead of lecturing students on the connection between their learning and real life, the teacher can place them in situations where they make discoveries themselves. By careful design and management, artificiality can be minimized, but of course it can never be completely eliminated.

SOCIAL LEARNING IN GAMING/SIMULATIONS

Because gaming/simulation places learners in direct contact with each other it is a powerful promoter of social learning. Role-playing experiences allow the gifted child, especially the shy or retiring one, to be recognized for his or her own individuality, creativity, and sense of humor. The give-and-take situations also permit the gifted

child to practice getting along with others who are less able.

REALITY AND PLAY AS MEDIA INGREDIENTS

In choosing or designing learning games and simulation, strive to make connections to reality. Good candidate scenarios are local controversial issues (should the shopping center be built?), national energy policy, the automobile in society, planning one's course of study, what people do to earn a living, reviewing films and literature, etc. To accentuate reality, invite outside speakers to come in with examples of their work. Utilize newspapers and periodicals. Conduct field trips that are preceded and followed by relevant activities. Wherever possible, incorporate humor, exaggeration, chance, and competition. With their natural instinct for play the children will enthusiastically and expectantly enter into the activity. Since these media are open-ended, stimulating, interactive, and multi-disciplined, they fit admirably into the gifted child's view of the world—a world whose horizons are limitless and where exploration is sheer joy.

Editor's Note: The author is owner of California Learning Simulations 750 Lurline dr. Foster City CA, 94404, [415-349-2195]. Catalogue available on request. This article was solicited by the editor from a prominent West Coast outfit known for educational programs based on gaming and simulation.

Köberg and Bagnall. THE UNIVERSAL TRAVELER. Wm Kaufman, 1 First St. Los Altos, CA, 94022, 127 pp, \$3.95, 1974.

A soft-system guide to creativity, problem-solving and the process of reaching goals, according to flyer. Looks useful for H.S. classes.
