

Play as Pedagogy¹

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Sam Gill

To catch the provocative chiasmatic structure of our topic perhaps the more fitting title to this presentation should be “*Play as Pedagogy; Pedagogy as Play.*” Letting these reversibilities reverberate for a few moments and play themselves out, it seems clear that my remarks to you must have something to do with both play and the art and science of teaching. What strikes me as essential here is to demonstrate to you that, in important ways, these two things, play and pedagogy, are not separable, even though since grammar school our teachers have conditioned us to hold the two as virtually antithetical. Teachers regularly beseech students to “Stop playing around so you can learn!” So particularly in the setting of higher education where we have put away childish things, how dare I consort with you to tell your students to start playing so they may learn! Or, even worse, to tell you as developing teachers that your teaching is playing.

It is perhaps not all that clear what it means to learn or to teach, especially in the current mood in which education and students are invariably seen as a products. The Colorado State legislature increasingly wants qualitative and quantitative production controls measured through testing. In our information age, education has increasingly become information processing. The older ideas and values that birthed the liberal arts understanding of education has now all but disappeared. I am happy to leave the information processing approach to the legislature and to those administrators and faculty cowed by them and get on with creating a style of education that shapes students to be body-minded persons equipped with a sophisticated and nuanced multi-perspectival understanding of themselves, their culture, and their world so they may live humanely with passion and purpose. I prefer creativity and sophistication to content and conformity.

Creativity, sophistication, nuance are the distinctions of open-mindedness, depth of understanding, appreciation for complexity, and the ability to act and be strongly convicted while recognizing that there are rarely truths or clear and simple answers. I believe humanity is distinguished by the capacity for such learning.

Play is a fascinating term. It is among the earliest words we learn as children. My kindergarten granddaughter had the word on a spelling test last week. Play is linked with being a kid, with lightness and fun. Play is linked with the non-productive, with make-believe, with unstructured socialization with friends, with physical activity and sport. Play is associated with imagination. Play is oscillatory movement: game pieces on a board, sport figures on a playfield, light shimmering on water. Play is usually opposed to work, to production, to seriousness. Play is something done just for the love of it, that is, it is autotelic, yet we have come to develop leisure industries, we pay our greatest musicians and

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sports figures enormous sums of money, and, in Boulder as elsewhere, few people are more serious about their playing than the athletes. In business and politics one is not important unless she or he is a player.

In his profound work “On the Aesthetic Education of Man” published in 1793, Friederich Schiller described play as a distinctively human drive. But he didn’t see it in simple terms. Rather play is a drive that arises when other drives are understood as operating in concert. He outlined a number of these pairs in his book. He described one of these pair of drives as the “sensuous” drive and the “formal” drive. He wrote that he sees these forces as constituting

two contrary challenges to man, the two fundamental laws of his sensuo-rational nature. The first [sensuous drive] insists upon absolute reality; he is to turn everything which is mere form into world, and make all his potentialities fully manifest. The second [formal drive] insists upon absolute formality: he is to destroy everything in himself which is mere world, and bring harmony into his change. In other words, he is to externalize all that is within him, and give form to all that is outside him (XI.9)

The sensuous drive proceeds from the sensual and physical aspect of human existence. Whenever this drive acts exclusively, one is, as Schiller wrote, “a unit of quantity, an occupied moment of time (XII.2).” When this drive acts exclusively, there is no enduring form, only a moment of sensation. The formal drive proceeds from the rational nature and strives to set us at liberty from the flux of change and sensation. It embraces the wholeness of time and space seeking eternity to the annulment of temporal change, of determining event. Yet, were this drive to act alone the human entity loses individuality by becoming idea, species. Humans are then no longer in time, they have become time.

Schiller concluded that neither drive is dispensable, that each needs the restrictive and modulating effect of the other. He held that the appropriate arrangement is achieved through, as he wrote

the reciprocal action between the two drives, reciprocal action of such a kind that the activity of the one both gives rise to, and sets limits to, the activity of the other, and in which each in itself achieves its highest manifestation precisely by reason of the other being active (XIV.1).

The oscillating interaction of these two drives in concert gives rise to, Schiller believed, a third thing, a third drive, which he called “play.”

Well, a great deal more might be said of Schiller’s understanding of play, yet the inspiration is clear. He was describing what I think might be best called, to borrow a term from Derrida, a “structurality.” He was, I believe, trying to understand the dynamic of oppositional structures such as form and sense, that is, the vitality of their interplay. Our lives and studies are defined by these oppositional structures such as right and wrong, good and bad, body and mind, female and male, liberal and conservative, insider and outsider. Schiller clearly understood that to attempt to resolve the seeming tension between opposing forces would produce an undesirable condition or conclusion. Schiller’s insight was to see that in such a structure of opposition, we must not seek resolution by the survival of only one, nor even is it to find some balanced stasis between the two. Rather it is the understanding of a structurality of play in

which each needs the other both to realize itself and to be properly controlled and modulated. When this dynamic oscillating interaction comes about it constitutes in itself a new drive, a force, the dynamic force of play. Interestingly, Schiller, writing a philosophy of aesthetics, identified play with beauty.

Play then occurs when there is an appreciation of the importance of interactivity, interdependence, interplay to gain a deep sophisticated understanding of anything.

Returning now to pedagogy, to the art of teaching, I want to suggest that the structural condition for all learning is initiated and fueled by incongruity or incredulity. If there is nothing out of place, nothing that seems not to make sense, no surprise, we have no motivation to learn. Thus the structure that motivates learning is incongruity. When this condition of incongruity does not motivate our studies, we are proceeding on the model of education as primarily information processing. Nothing we would care to consider significant learning exists without this dramatic condition. Jonathan Smith, a religion scholar and my mentor, inspired a new era in the academic study of religion by insisting that incongruity is our principal motivator. He borrowed a phrase from Paul Ricoeur holding that “incongruity gives rise to thought.” Since I see body and mind as fundamentally inseparable, I would say incongruity gives rise to thoughtful action.

The apperception of incongruity initiates a process of comparison, the oscillatory movement back and forth between juxtaposed alternatives in terms of some third point of view or condition. Comparison—explicit or implicit—is fundamental to all learning, all meaning. A is compared with B in terms of some issue or perspective C. The oscillatory process is driven to produce some explanation in which the incongruity noted between A and B would diminish. This is the process of hypothetic inference and leads to the establishment of theories and explanations and interpretations and knowledge and beliefs and stories.² Yet, as is clearly obvious even to the naïve, any incongruity that quickly and easily yields to a universally embraced resolution produces little knowledge and can be of little interest. There is nothing profound, nothing sophisticated, nothing provocative, to be gained here. Clearly those incongruities worth our time and attention are those that seem to defy any resolution at all. These are the issues and problems that refuse to be played to any conclusion. These are the issues that drive a scholar through a lifetime of research and discovery and revision and provocation. These are the subjects of the books that we read again and again always discovering something new.

Postmodernity has played out the groundlessness of our world, forever deconstructing any ground on which we might attempt to stand in order to clearly see the world. We often feel frustrated and hopeless by the seeming endless digression and ambiguity of postmodernity. It seems that there is no end to talk, no ground on which to stand.

I think that play offers an alternative. To approach incongruity from the perspective of play is to applaud the profundity of an issue and to be driven to always see greater richness, finer nuances, more opportunity in the interplay of incongruous forces. I suppose an analogy might be helpful. Suppose that we are looking at a fine cut diamond. Our fullest appreciation of the diamond is to turn it this way and

² Sam Gill, “Charles Sanders Peirce: Play and the Logic of Discovery” www.Sam-Gill.com. 2009

that to increasingly reveal the colors, the play of light, the expanding depths and mysteries it holds. It would not be a fine diamond if we found but a single color on a flat surface without depth or complexity. Beauty, perhaps Schiller had this in mind, is in the mysterious quality of never being exhaustible through examination, in always having a surprise in store for us if turned in a new way or seen in some new setting.

As pedagogues, as teachers, I believe that we must guide our students to approach the subjects we share as we would beautiful mysterious diamonds. While at times we may want to draw conclusions that move us toward a new step, a new problem, a new application; we must nevertheless always be exploring the mystery and wonder that must underlie our subject, our interest, our approach. Otherwise, why pursue it?

I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't offer some concrete suggestions for you to apply in your teaching and I expect that we will discuss many more.

Fundamentally what I am suggesting is an attitude towards your subject as well as towards the experience of learning. A worthy subject is complicated and not easily understood. While there may be a lot of information that is essential to even beginning to grasp the complexities of a subject, even the delivery of this information must be motivated by the richness and profundity it leads to. I always try to pair the study of specific cultural historical topics with broader theoretical concerns. These too are always at play. Anything specific without accompanying attention to the general and theoretical is dull and empty, and, frankly also simply dishonest in keeping tacit the determining perspectives. It is rather like propaganda.

We often describe something of the attitude and approach I am suggesting here by invoking the term "problematize." I hear graduate students use this word as a sort of mantra. While I appreciate the intention of this term, I always feel somewhat dissatisfied when I hear it. The way I hear it suggests to me a purposeful complexifying simply because that is what is called for in higher education. I often feel that the problematizer has little clue as to why such a strategy or process is engaged. So problematize if you like, but do so always for the purpose of revealing more and more layers of profundity, more surprises of the richness, more play in the subject. Help your students understand that things that seem simple and easy to read and understand are rarely worth our attention. Help your students appreciate that complexity is not hard and boring, but exciting and provocative and empowering when pursued in the terms of play.

In his essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Derrida described the distinction of our era as a loss of center, that point of presence and sense of origin that traditionally grounded us. The downside of the center is that it functions to stop the movement of the freeplay of substitutions. The absence of center necessarily gives rise to play. Derrida wrote,

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from freeplay and from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation. The other,

which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being who, throughout the history of all his history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game. (p. 265)

So it would appear that our agenda must be to embrace the freeplay, the endless substitution, the ongoing process of interpretation. True to his character and certainly of similar mind as Schiller three hundred years ago, Derrida warns us that even in this structure—to play or not to play—there must also be play and yet he can scarcely come up with imagery or words to describe it ... something of a nascent monstrosity. But surely to understand play as structurality, that is as structural dynamics, movement, oscillation is a start. Derrida wrote that “to risk meaning nothing is to start to play.”