

Lessons Learned From Playground Pedagogy

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Small children want to learn to the degree that they are unable to distinguish learning from fun. They keep this attitude until we adults convince them that learning is not fun.
—Glenn Doman

Compare this type of learning with the often distant and ambiguous goals that typify classrooms dominated by lesson plans, prescribed standards, and preparation for yet another test. I am not arguing against the important role of formal learning situations. However, these prescribed and presented learning experiences need to be counterbalanced with learning that is based on student interests and a pedagogy that makes whatever students are doing instantaneously relevant to their own interests, motivation, and desire to produce something that is important to them!

But there is a third characteristic of playground pedagogy that should be infused into at least some of our formal learning situations if we are to improve the efficiency of learning. This characteristic, pure and simple, is enjoyment! Whenever people ask me to define what I mean by enrichment or high end learning, I always answer with what I call the three E's—enjoyment, engagement, and enthusiasm. And enjoyment leads the list. While one would be naive to argue that all learning (or our jobs and work) can always be enjoyable, efficiency in school or the workplace is always heightened when students or adults enjoy what they are doing.

“The Creative Button Boutique”: Playground Pedagogy in School Education

A couple of months ago I visited with a group of elementary grade children who were enrolled in an enrichment cluster that designs, “manufactures,” and markets colourful buttons. An enrichment cluster is an across grade level group that comes together during specially designated time blocks because of common interests and a willingness to work together for the express purpose of producing a product or service. The clusters are modelled on real world enterprises such as businesses, advocacy groups, research institutes, literary societies, or artistic production companies. There are no lesson plans or lists of standards to follow, but many types of powerful learning take place within the context of producing the product or developing the service. All activity is directed toward having an impact on an intended audience. Students seek out information and resources on a need-to-know basis, and they use the methods of practicing professionals, even if their activities are on a more junior level than adult professionals. The teacher serves as a guide-on-the-side rather than an instructor—gently helping students to escalate their work to as high a level as possible for their age and maturity levels.

The day I visited the “Creative Button Boutique” the room was a beehive of activity. Divisions of labor were readily apparent—some students were experimenting with colours, designs, and digital photography while others were calculating the sale price of buttons based on the costs of materials. Still others were preparing advertisements by designing posters and rehearsing oral presentations for the school’s public address and closed circuit television system.

The business committee was searching for information on the Internet about quality control and there was talk of a website for their company and the possibility of having a booth at a forthcoming town fair. “Will Mr. Sampson (the technology teacher) help us set up a website?” “Do you have to pay for a website?” “Who do we need to contact to get a booth at the town fair?” “How can we find out if they charge for booths?”

“Should we write a letter to the Chamber of Commerce?” The most obvious thing I observed was that everyone was having fun! The excitement and enthusiasm were contagious because the students were all working on problems that were real to them; they were eager to do whatever was necessary to make their products creative and their business a success. The atmosphere reminded me of the kinds of enjoyment and engagement that can be observed almost every day on the playground! And yet, these young people were engaged in very meaningful learning that represents a practical blend of cognitive, affective, and motivational growth.

As the time period for the enrichment cluster drew to a close, the manager of the Creative Button Boutique decided to give me a gift of one of their products. He presented me with a choice of several buttons, and made it clear that they could only afford to give me one button. At that moment I saw a glow in the young man’s eyes that suddenly reminded me of what learning was all about—competence, pride, satisfaction, achievement, and most of all enjoyment. All of the goals of schooling are more easily and effectively accomplished when young people are doing in “real school” what they do so easily and naturally on the playground.

“The Creative Button Boutique” Kibiko Hachiyon

As a guide-on-the-side perhaps the most important thing the teacher does is establish a space and climate within which self-motivated, self-organised and self-determined enterprising activity could flourish. The six C’s of motivation (Turner & Paris, 1995; Wang & Han, 2010): choice, challenge, control (autonomy), collaboration, constructing meaning, and consequences (recognition) have the potential to encourage students’ intrinsic motivation when applied to open-ended tasks such as the Creative Button Boutique described above. There is no single correct answer in an open-ended task, allowing students to make their own choices and determined their own goals. In the open-ended task context, teachers guide students in selecting the most appropriate choices, setting up short- and long-term goals, planning and evaluating their projects, working collaboratively, constructing personal meaning through the task, and displaying their final projects.

Sources

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