

ABSTRACT

Practical advice on increasing the impact of TA work with the tools of play.

In Search of Serious Play

All Teaching Artists have taken unexpected detours that lead to miracles. We've all created magical experiences in which people are too engaged to notice the incredible amount they are learning. As TAs, we search for *serious play*—purposeful fun that stimulates exhilarating work and genuine learning. But how does it happen? How do we strategically incorporate it into our teaching?

Obviously, we can't *make* people play. People *choose* to play. However, if we set up certain conditions—a conducive environment, physical and emotional safety, and a few parameters that provide freedom as well as structure—we can draw people in.

The most effective play is *planned*. Of course, serendipitous opportunities knock on our doors now and again—often with great results—but nothing compares to strategic, targeted play with a purpose. It can happen at any and all stages of a lesson—in the warm up, in a main activity, in performance, in reflection. As you create a lesson plan, examine it and wonder, “How could serious play enter in here, and here, and here?”

Conditions for Play

Virtually every form of play has rules of some sort—consider how many rules there are in baseball, chess, and other favorite pastimes. In our lessons, two or three simple rules can provide structure for creative exploration. If the rules are too loose, disorganization results. If directions become rigid or burdensome, the playful impulse diminishes, resulting in work, not play.

As in any good lesson, all instructions must be perfectly clear. The best directions have an enticing “bite” that invites and

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encourages play. For example, as part of a professional development workshop, choreographer Hilary Easton asked New York Philharmonic TAs to “find one cool, repeatable move.” Hilary’s brilliantly simple instruction compelled participants to reach farther

than they would have had she simply said, “Find a movement you can do over and over.”

Keeping learners in a “state of play” depends to some extent on how you pace your activities. A warm-up involving creative visualization requires calm instructions and a slow pace. An improvisatory game where it’s best not to think too hard benefits from a rapid-fire delivery that generates momentum and spikes energy levels.

The most playful TAs may change pace several times within a single workshop. Of course, together with an activity’s pace, its difficulty must be modulated in proportion to a group’s skill level. When an activity becomes too simple and predictable, participants become bored. If an activity becomes too difficult, participants feel frustrated and overwhelmed.

Play, especially at the most sophisticated levels, relies on prior learning and experiences. Think of how much knowledge and skill goes into improvising a dramatic monologue or soloing in a high school jazz band. Because play presumes knowledge, capabilities, and experience, we first have to ask ourselves, “What do the students need to know in order to be successful?” The process often benefits from modeling, a preparatory activity, or a brainstorming session. In many instances, grounding the activity in familiar territory provides structure and comfort.

That said, play often makes a departure from the routine. We may need to catch people off guard by changing a ritual, or going on a field trip to another part of the school. Sometimes, we may even have to change the rules mid-game.

Strategies for Facilitating Serious Play

Once the conditions for serious play are met, we have countless strategies and tactics at our fingertips for facilitating it. I’ll share some of the more transferable ones I’ve observed, and you can extrapolate your own ideas from them. (And if you send the Editor of the *TAJ* enough brilliant ideas that aren’t covered here, rumor has it that he might print them in an upcoming issue ...)

Think about which of these strategies have informed your work the most. Then, consider how you might incorporate new ones in the future. Choose specific areas for challenging yourself and expanding your abilities.

One of the most common and direct tactics is simply to **adapt a familiar game** to suit the purposes of your lesson. Many TAs have adapted board games, television game shows, and children’s games such as charades to teach and reflect on artistic concepts and experiences. Think about what kinds of games your learners enjoy and how you might capitalize on them.

I once saw a video in which high school theater TAs were eliciting some amazing epiphanies about *Romeo and Juliet* through a game of Shakespearean Truth or Dare. A few students were assigned roles from the tragedy. The rest of the class questioned them, or dared them to reenact scenes in ways that explored alternative outcomes. The TAs used the improvisations to help participants deepen their reflections on character and consequences.

Manipulatives, objects, and materials are golden for facilitating creative exploration.

An actor passes a comb around the circle and has students transform it into something else by way of pantomime. A musician lets students stretch giant rubber bands in response to harmonic tension and release. A visual artist has students create tiny construction paper frames for viewing the world around them. A dancer gives participants large elastic terrycloth tubes for exploring the kinds of confinement they'll observe in Martha Graham's *Lamentation*.

TAs can avail themselves of a wide variety of materials including rope, construction paper, note cards, pipe cleaners, phone cords, broom handles, scarves, soda straws, "beach balls of compositional empowerment" . . . Sometimes I just take a bizarre object or an unusual material and give myself (or the TA who I am supervising) the challenge of incorporating it into the next lesson. Whether the object becomes a conversation piece, an actual art supply, or a tool for stretching the imagination, the challenge of working with it always stimulates creative thinking.

With or without an object, young children constantly demonstrate how **pretending and role-playing** offer natural entries into the world of play. TAs from any discipline can lead theater games and exercises to deepen emotional responses and encourage imaginative creation. At times, teachers and students benefit from assuming alter egos or reversing roles. Try "playing dumb" in ways that help your learners to discover, experiment, and articulate.

As your students share their thoughts, listen closely. The door to spontaneous play is most frequently opened by **something a participant says or suggests**. Even ridiculous or unexpected responses can yield rich results for TA work. Violist Rachel Shapiro shared an anecdote of how a serious composition activity suddenly entered the realm of serious play during an interactive concert at a middle school. What happened? A student suggested that the subject of a musical composition should be a somewhat incongruous current event: President George W. Bush choking on a pretzel while watching television. The unusual inspiration tested the creativity of students and musicians alike. Student interest was heightened because the musicians were willing to go with the absurd image. Of course, not all random or ridiculous notions are worth pursuing, but keep your eyes open for the non sequitur that can lead to powerful learning.

Just as an odd notion can spark spur-of-the-moment creativity, strategic play can **transform the transmission of dry factual information into an exciting inquiry**. One effective and widely adapted contextual activity is the "information cocktail party."¹ In this activity, every participant is given a note card containing a fact or a quote that must be memorized. Then, people have five minutes to "schmooze" and gather as much information as they can before returning to their seats to write down their findings. In my experience, this activity is far more efficient and potent than delivering the same information via lecture, especially if a few of the cards have quirky, humorous, or surprising secrets to keep the "schmoozers" buzzing.

Speaking of which, I've noticed that the most captivating TAs are masters of **surprise and secret**. Departing from routine expectations automatically changes the energy of a room and charges the air with a sense of anticipation. Similarly, secrets elicit curiosity and a compelling urge to discover.² Think about ways you can offer students the challenge of uncovering secrets or the thrill of keeping and revealing secrets of their own. If we're truly aesthetic educators, every workshop will have at least one secret, and therefore, at least one opportunity for planning a seriously playful moment.

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Serious Play in Action

For an entire month, I committed myself to plan for serious play in every teaching situation I encountered. In some cases, I set up a brief, lighthearted moment. Other times, the entire workshop involved play.

Brief play proved effective for underscoring concepts in memorable ways. My favorite example was using voices and fingers to count 12-bar blues form with kindergarteners. [“TEN-two-three-four!” (oops we’ve run out of fingers!) “ELEVEN-two-three-four” (Gotta lift those feet for the last two bars!—what are you guys laughing at?) “TWELVE-two-three-four” (We’re balancing on our bottoms with all four limbs in the air?! Whoa! That’s really silly! Keep counting! Here come the next 12 bars!)]. Inquiry-based lessons benefited from more extended play.

Twice a week I teach music theory and literature to second-year dancers at The Juilliard School. My students follow a demanding schedule that keeps them busy from 9 a.m. until 9 p.m. In the past, getting students to turn in their assignments on time has proven problematic. I wondered how I might establish accountability without being punitive and without repelling students from the study material.

One morning, I asked my students to take out their homework assignments. I walked over to the stereo and pressed play. Instead of the piano introduction to Schubert’s song “Erlkönig,” the speakers unexpectedly thundered a hip-hop refrain from the Black Eyed Peas.

Within seconds of being caught totally off guard, the entire class was swaying and grooving. I had their attention. “Ladies and gentlemen, *hands up* if you haven’t done the assignment yet!” I rapped along with the song which repeatedly admonished people to raise their hands. The guilty parties were led to a row of chairs at the front of the room where they sat laughing as the music faded out.

What followed was “The Erlkönig Talk Show,” hosted by a charismatic and witty volunteer who had done the assignment. The students who raised their hands assumed the role of an inquisitive studio audience, which earnestly desired to learn everything it could about Schubert’s groundbreaking *Lied*. Using a microphone as a prop, the host facilitated a rich discussion between them and his panel of world-famous Schubert scholars (who had done their homework). I sat back and watched my students create a deep, yet humorous inquiry into Schubert’s masterpiece, as they shared their discoveries, opinions, and thoughts based on the previous night’s assignment. Juicy homework questions like “Why do you think Goethe disliked Schubert’s setting of his poem?” fueled the discussion.

When the game had served its purpose and their skit was just about to reach the point of diminishing returns, we applauded our panelists and returned the room to its former state. I went back to the stereo and watched my students sympathetically grow tense in response to Schubert’s relentless piano introduction. Mission accomplished.

Epilogue

Playfulness is not just an extra ingredient to “spice up” a lesson; it is a way of thinking, being, and perceiving. It is more a philosophy of mindfulness than a method of teaching. Play brings a certain degree of variability and risk, and we must sensitively negotiate these aspects in order to maintain the trust and comfort of our students and partner teachers. Because not all play proves constructive, we must be ever vigilant to ensure that it leads to richer thinking, learning, and perceiving. As Thomas Cabaniss puts it³:

At the end of the day, to be able to say ‘Well, we played’ would not be sufficient. Play and playfulness are ways of getting at learning in the arts. In our work as Teaching Artists, we help students to reflect upon the works they encounter and to articulate their observations, feelings, and understandings, using more and more expressive language. We want their reflections to be based on deepening experiences of observing, listening, performing, and creating. Play and playfulness are engaging ways to achieve those objectives.

Search for this kind of engagement. Develop the mind that cries, “Play on!”

Endnotes

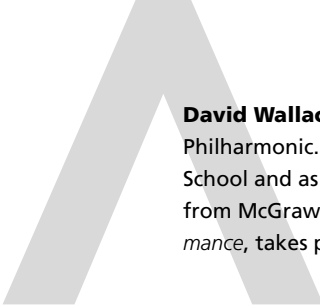
¹I first experienced this activity at a Lincoln Center Institute workshop led by TA Wendy Stern.

²In a workshop dealing with the musicological issues surrounding gender and composition, I had participants observe, analyze, interpret, and compare two nineteenth century sonatas for violin and piano. One was by Amy Beach, the other was by Richard Strauss. Only after the participants had exhausted and interpreted both works did I reveal the actual composer of each. By that time, participants were eager to discover whether the answer confirmed their observations about the works and their preconceptions about gender.

³Tom Cabaniss in a workshop at the New York Philharmonic, December 8, 2003.

Works Cited

Wallace, David. *Reaching Out: A Musician’s Guide to Interactive Performance*. New York: McGraw Hill, forthcoming.



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