

Play and Social Change: Reframing Play as a Lifelong Activity

by

Dana Keller

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Elizabeth Swadener, Chair  
Dr. Stephani Etheridge-Woodson

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## Abstract

Arguing against the traditional Western notion of play as a childhood developmental activity, I make the case for reframing play as a lifelong activity, which can also be used to facilitate social transformation. I present my own exploratory research project on play at midlife (35-55), my exploration of using the arts as a play practice with adults, and explain my own definition of play. In order to reframe play, I challenge the work/play dichotomy that is so common in Western culture. The article concludes with a suggestion for how play might be combined with social pedagogy and socially engaged practice as a tool for personal and social change.

Keywords: play, social transformation, social change, social pedagogy, semiotics

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## Play and Social Change: Reframing Play as a Lifelong Activity

A small, yet growing, body of research exists on play as a lifelong activity.

Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* is widely considered to be one of the foundational works on play, where he showed that "genuine, pure play is one of the main bases of civilization," (Huizinga, 1938) and made the case for play's role throughout the ages in law, science, war, philosophy, and art. In another seminal work, *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian Sutton-Smith explored the nebulous nature of play and examined the "popular cultural rhetorics that underlie the various play theories and play terms" (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p.10) .

More recent scholars researching adult play have focused on trying to better define play (M. D. Brown Stuart, 2010), or to examine the correlation between play activities and playfulness as a personality trait (Barnett, 2011; Proyer, 2012; Shen, Chick, & Zinn, 2014) The study of play spans multiple fields: psychology, sociology, leisure studies, organizational and management studies, anthropology, and more. As such, becoming familiar with all play literature and its associated concepts (flow, positive psychology, creativity, innovation, etc.) is a daunting task.

In this article, I will use some of the current research along with my own experience to present a vision I have for the possibilities of play as a viable way of knowing and as part of a practical application for social change. Along with my own exploratory research, I present a case for reframing play as a vital, lifelong activity that can effect both personal and social change.

The writing style of this article will decidedly depart from the very non-playful academic writing tradition. I will follow Montuori's (2003) lead in his assertion that it "behooves us to incorporate 'performative' and other 'subjective' elements into our own

scholarship” (p. 238) by including first-person narratives of my experience and exploratory research—which exemplifies my own playful participation in academia.

### **My Research**

Attitudes toward play in Western culture have been shaped by two main theories of development: those of Piaget and Vygotsky. Both of these “theoretical approaches to the study of play in developmental psychology collectively presented a view of human development in which childhood was conceptualized as playful and exploratory whereas adulthood was conceptualized as logical and productive” (Göncü & Perone, 2005, p. 139).

I wanted to challenge the Western cultural notion of play as an activity solely important for proper child development, therefore I opted to explore adult perceptions of play and playfulness at midlife for my Applied Project to complete my Masters in Social and Cultural Pedagogy at Arizona State University. I followed research project with three adult PlayDates! as a way to explore the possibilities of play as a life practice and it’s potential for addressing social change—this part of the project was also meant to fulfill my requirements for a graduate certificate in Socially Engaged Practice. I will first present the results of the initial research project, then share my exploration of play as a practice, and finally explore the possibilities for reframing play as a lifespan activity. Given the dearth of research on play across the lifespan, this project may provide, at minimum, some concepts to consider or ideas for future exploration.

### **Project Design**

My research questions were:

- Who is playing at midlife (ages 35-55) and how often?

- How do people play? (self-defined)
- Why do people play at midlife?

To explore the answers to these questions, I created a twelve-question online survey that asked about:

- The types of unpaid activities in which the survey respondents participate
- Which (if any) of those activities they consider to be play
- How often the respondents participate in the activity
- The reasons they participate and benefits they receive from participation.

The survey also included a playfulness measurement tool, the Short Measure of Adult Playfulness (SMAP), which consists of five items that allow for a global assessment of adult playfulness using a seven-point scale (1 = “*strongly disagree*,” 7 = “*strongly agree*”) (Proyer, 2012) .

At the end of the survey, participants could “opt-in” to be contacted for a phone or in-person interview, which would enter them in a drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card. The interview questions explored participant responses to the survey.

Since the survey was promoted through my Facebook and Twitter accounts, it represents a convenience sample. Age and gender were the only demographics collected, and there is a good chance that participants were not very diverse in ethnicity, income level, or level of education.

The survey had 141 participants: 84 women, 52 men, 1 participant who preferred not to identify gender and 4 participants who did not complete the survey, bringing the total number of relevant responses to 137.

SMAP scores have a possible range of 5-35, so scores were adjusted by -5 to a possible range of 0-30, with 0 being not at all playful and 30 being extremely playful. The average score overall was 20.6, with women averaging 19.5 and men averaging 22.3. The standard deviation for women was 6.3 and for men standard deviation was 5 (Table 1).

Table 1  
Average SMAP scores, range and standard deviation, by gender and overall

	Average SMAP score	SMAP range	Standard Deviation
Women	19.49	3-30	6.35
Men	22.35	9-30	5.04
Overall	20.6		

The average SMAP scores also varied according to age group, with women in the 35-39 year old age bracket being the most playful among women, and with men in the 40-44 year old age bracket receiving the highest playfulness scores among men. (Figures 1 and 2)

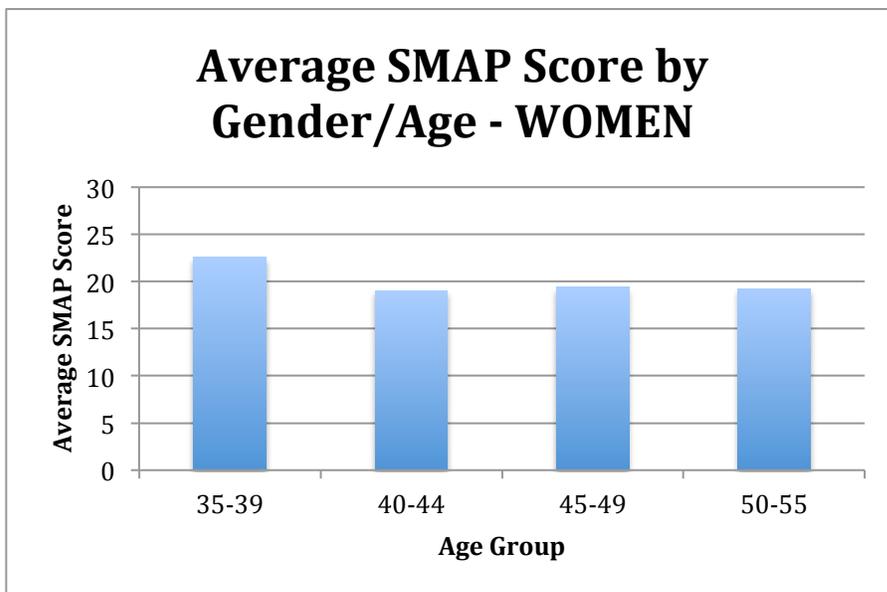


Figure 1. Short Measure of Adult Playfulness (SMAP) average scores for women by age.

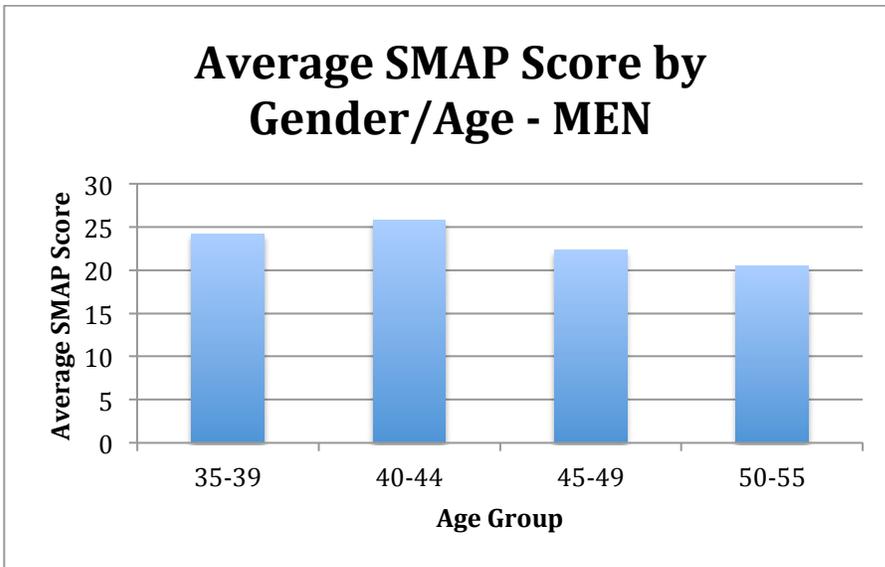


Figure 2. Short Measure of Adult Playfulness (SMAP) scores for men by age

Men had higher playfulness scores overall as well as a greater frequency of participation in play activities. The largest discrepancy between male and female respondents was in the 40-44 age group, with women averaging an SMAP score of less than 20 and men averaging over 25. This would be an interesting area for future studies to consider how parenting, career, or other factors might account for this variance.

Participants reported a wide range of activities that they considered to be play, with many activities falling into what might traditionally be classified as “hobbies” (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Word cloud of all activities listed by participants as “play” activities.

Most of the activities that the respondents considered to be play could also be considered leisure activities, raising the question of the difference for adults between play and leisure. Is all adult play leisure or is all leisure adult play? One approach to explore the imbrication of play and leisure in adulthood would be to compare characteristics of play with the context of the leisure activities to determine which leisure activities could fall into the play category, similar to the strategy used by Yarnal, et al. in their research on The Red Hat Society® (Kerstetter, Chick, & Yarnal, 2008) .

My approach was to consider why the participants define play in the way that they do—what *their* definitions of play are—rather than comparing their responses to the current and varied definitions of scholars. While the survey did not ask participants outright for their definitions, some answers can be gleaned from their responses to why they play.

The most frequent responses that participants gave for why they play were:

- It's fun
- I want to keep doing it/coming back for more
- I enjoy other participants
- I feel relaxed during the activity

These responses echo the findings in the Yarnal et al. study as well, with fun being the most common response given for why the respondents play.

E-mails requesting interviews were sent to those participants who indicated at the end of the survey that they were willing to participate in a one-on-one interview. Eight participants responded by scheduling interview times, and interviews were conducted with six women and two men, either in person or by phone. The women interviewed

ranged from very low SMAP scores to very high (5-28). Of the two men interviewed, one scored very low playfulness and the other very high (9 and 26). It is worthwhile to note that the male interviewee with the low playfulness score agreed strongly with the Western notion of play as a childhood activity:

You know I get, I get enjoyment when I cook and it turns out well. Right? You know, and that's a, you know, a good feeling, right? But, you know, the activity itself wasn't a play activity, it was a leisure activity...hanging out with other people...while fun, pleasurable, laughable and stuff...you know, I wouldn't call it play.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative research methods were used to code the data (interview transcriptions). First, I began by reading through the transcripts, looking for patterns, words, and topics. I created a tentative list of codes, and then did a second and third pass through to finalize the coding categories.

### **Results**

My goal was to explore how and why people play at midlife and what activities (if any) participants consider to be play. The interviews revealed three primary themes: attributes of play, the results of playing, and attitudes toward play and playfulness.

**Attributes of Play.** The most frequent responses regarding attributes of play were: fun, creativity, learning, spontaneity, collaboration/connection, and a break from the ordinary.

Interviewees frequently mentioned that fun was a primary factor in their play. Several participants indicated that it takes more of an effort to have fun at middle age because of adult responsibilities.

- “So I’ve lost some of my playfulness in middle age...But every now and then I see glimpses of it and it’s...it’s *fun*.”

- "...and doing all that stuff to me that's play because it's not...it's something that I like and it's fun..."
- "Yeah, it's always fun. I never not have fun doing it."
- "It's always fun. Jumping is always fun."
- "I play in everything that I do, to an extent. Because it keeps me youthful, I'm 40 years old, but I...I don't want to stop having fun. That would be like death to me, if I stopped having fun."
- "I think sometimes it reminds me...to have fun with the kids. It reminds me to loosen up...and have fun."

A second attribute of play to which interviewees frequently referred was creativity. Interviewees with both high and low SMAP scores referred to creativity as an important part of why they play.

- "Creativity is the electricity of my soul."
- "It allows the creativity and the fun."
- "It's probably the most creative thing I do in my life. I don't do a lot of creative things, you know, I'm very analytical, and so the creative part of it is a very, kind of...unique thing for me. And I guess that's probably one of the things—why I think that it's playful, because it's creative? And I don't do creative. You know? Um, you know...I do spreadsheets."
- "I've recently started playing Minecraft because [my son] loves Minecraft. And actually found that I enjoyed it myself. So sometimes I'll actually sit there and play it, because it's very creative..."

Interviewees also referred to learning as being an important aspect of their play activity. While learning was not the primary goal of the activity, they mentioned learning from the people with whom they were doing the activity as well as how self-directed learning sometimes is part of their play (for example, learning how to use new software just for the fun of it).

- “I love learning new things, so for me that is kind of play in a way.”
- “You know, I’m going to revisit actually what I said earlier. I’d said you know when you’re young play is all about learning, I think play can be about learning when you’re older, too.”
- “And so it’s, you know...you don’t have to have a social aspect, but part of that is important. Because it’s learning. Because part of that social event is learning. Who did...especially if you’re fishing in a larger group. I’ve fished in groups of fifty, um, you know, in the evening it’s who did what, where...so it’s very educational.”

Participants referred to their association of spontaneity with play somewhat frequently, either as being important to their own play activity, or as a reason why children are more playful (because they have more time/fewer demands and can be spontaneous).

- “I can just decide at the spur of the moment to go, you know, spend a couple of hours at the store if I want and hang out...And I’m not a very—I’m not, I mean I’m not very, not at all, I’m not a spontaneous person. At all. I mean, I’m like the antithesis of spontaneous. And it actually is one thing that...is a little bit more

spontaneous in my life, you know. So I guess that's why I kind of was coming on that as being kind of playful, the spontaneity of it?"

- "You can be spontaneous when you're a kid, but it's way harder when you're an adult....because I just think...I think, by nature, I think of play as a spontaneous thing...an unplanned, creative moment...you know...and...life gets in the way of those things."
- "But I guess maybe they don't see me as playful because a lot of times I plan it. Again, I think that's the mom in me. I always tell them it's their fault I'm that way...you know what I mean? So really? Kind of takes out the playful element sometimes."
- "Last night after—we got out of a...I was taking a class, a night class and instead of going two hours or three hours or whatever it normally goes, it went for 45 minutes, so we were leaving and one of the guys says, 'hey, let's go throw some football' so we went down to the grass and threw some football."

While interviewees mentioned some solo play, most of the play activities involved other people in some way and several people indicated that playing with others was a key attribute of play for them. For parents, collaborative play usually meant playing with their children.

- "We actually do [role playing games] as a family. Um, actually no, this is two families playing together."
- "And I always...like when my kids will say, 'Hey, can you do this with me?' Sometimes I'll say no, and then I'm thinking, whatever I'm doing now can wait and I can go play with them."

- “...that’s like the only thing I could come up with was, like, hobbies. Which are like, you know, some are creative like my needlepoint and stuff, but you know...and I do it with a group of people? A lot. So I guess that’s why I thought, like, my needlepoint is like play for me, but...you know, because it’s not like a solitary thing?”
- “...he likes to play [Minecraft] a little differently than I do, which is interesting...he likes to like, bring in the mobs, which are the bad guys you have to kill and they try and kill you, I don’t like any of that. And so when we do play, I’ve noticed he’s pretty good about tailoring it to be more of what I want to do...but at the same time, every now and then I’m like, ‘OK, I need to do what he wants to do, too,’ so I’ll play...”

Interviewees repeatedly mentioned that their play activity provided a break from the ordinary—the activity was not something they would typically do on a daily basis; instead they had to make time for it and step out of their usual schedule.

- “I think [playful activities] take me out of my stress of my day-to-day existence these days...and they give me a release from it.”
- “Jumping on the trampoline...because I usually do that with my kids...and it’s not something a normal adult would do on their own. So it seems more...anything that’s...it’s more of a kid activity.”
- “...if I’m stressed out or whatever, I can get out of my own head and mindlessly play this game for a little while...”

- “So like, I think of play as something that...is not part of my ordinary life. And so when I do something like that...when I take a day...that’s just a very...you know, that’s kind of selfish...that’s kind of how I think of it.”

**Results of playing.** The second major theme that arose was what the interviewees felt were the results of participating in play activities or from being playful. The most frequent responses were: joy/happiness, breath/break/relaxation, and getting a new perspective/recharging.

The most common response from interviewees on the results of playing was the joy they got out of participating or that participating made them feel happy. The interviewee who didn’t believe in adult play made the point that although the activities in which he participates produced joy or happiness, that still did not make the activity “play” by his definition. Several participants indicated that it was this production of joy or happiness that contributed to overall wellness as we age.

- “If you keep that throughout your life, you’re going to be a happier, healthier person, you’re going to have better interactions with people, um...I think that those that do not play and they take themselves too seriously are greatly missing out.”
- “Sort of like, um, competitions that are more playful, but it’s really teaching them the skills of their program...it really improves morale for a long time following.”
- “Yeah, I think it definitely does because you need to be happy, you need to feel good about yourself...you need to know ‘ok, maybe if I do this, then I’m just going to spend some time playing.’”

Participants repeatedly mentioned that their play (or leisure) activity provided them with a breath or a break. The word “breath” was used several times, which I found interesting; although “breath” can be used as a metaphorical word, from an embodied standpoint this response seems to indicate that we do not “breathe” while we are engaged in most of our daily, productive activities.

- “Um...I think because nobody’s asking me hard questions or...making me think too much. So my brain can just kinda take a rest. ‘Cause being a mom is hard. You know what I mean? Somebody always wants to know something or is asking something or is needing something or is blaming you for something. But when you—to me play time for me is just a deep breath and just get to be and not do a whole lot of thinkin’.”
- “Um, yeah. I like Candy Crush, or any sort of thing like that...that’s just something to fill time, that I don’t have to put a lot of thought into.”
- “It is a total release for me. I don’t have to worry about anything...I’m a foster/adoptive mom, I have high needs kids...it is a time for me to relax and just let go.”

Accompanying the idea of taking a break or a breath during play activities was that this time out of their daily routine allowed participants to recharge and/or see things in their lives from a new perspective.

- “Um...well I think, you know, play suggests enjoyment. I think it suggests camaraderie with other people. Um...I think that uh, play, is...is letting things go, but at the same time it gives you time to consider things in a different light.”

- “There’s just so much going on, I don’t know if I’m, you know, making the right choices, I always feel guilty, I’m not spending enough time with my son, blah, blah, blah...the minute I do something playful, I’m...it’s a stress release. It allows me to get out of my head and then take a big breath of fresh air and approach it from a new perspective. It’s my reset button.”
- “I think [my play activities] take me out of my stress of my day-to-day existence these days...and they give me a release from it.”

**Attitudes toward play.** The final theme that emerged was in regard to the interviewees’ attitudes toward play. Attitudes that emerged seemed to be in sync with the Western notion of play to which I have referred; although there was a sense that play is intrinsically good, desirable, and beneficial, it was also viewed as a guilty pleasure given that it is “purposeless” or time away from “work.”

- Only one participant felt strongly that adults do not “play” (except for games, like cards) and that play is strictly a childhood activity.
- All of the women expressed an attitude that play is a good thing and felt guilty for not making more time to play, or felt that time away from family and responsibilities was “selfish” or “wasting time.”
- Several of the female participants spoke of play primarily in relation to playing with their kids.
- Participants indicated that children play more than adults because:
  - They have more time
  - They need it for development
  - They are innocent

- They are more spontaneous
- Several participants also spoke about adult responsibilities and cares (financial, political, etc.) getting in the way of play.
- Participants indicated that play is good for health and wellness.
- There was an overall attitude by almost all participants that playful people are more fun and that being playful is a good thing.

## **Discussion**

This exploratory study brings up some interesting topics for consideration. The connection between learning and play in these adult participants' minds indicates an opportunity for reframing. The learning to which participants were referring was not classroom learning. Although it was goal oriented (Where are the best fishing locations? How does this computer program work? What is another needlepoint technique?), it was very exploratory in nature, collaborative, and learner-driven. The participants' learning expectations were very broad—more like being on an aimless Sunday drive than a prescribed weekday commute.

While participants did mention some types of solo play, almost all of their play activities involved connecting with others. Even activities like needlepoint, fly-fishing, or computer gaming—which one might consider to be solo activities—had an element of bonding to them. For those participants who were parents, this bonding was often with their children; for other interviewees it was bonding with the other adults participating in the activity.

There was also a huge focus on why it can be difficult for adults to play—primarily because of adult concerns in the “real world.” Participants indicated that there

was too much to get done, they felt guilty when playing because they were not being productive, or they were overly weighed down by the state of the world. Despite this, they felt they “should” make more time to play, that making time for play was a choice (and a good one), and that play helped them gain new perspective and release stress. There may be some scientific support for this. A 2013 study on young adults and perceived stress showed that “Playful young adults appear to have sufficient cognitive resources that they are able to keep stressors in perspective or minimize their effect and prevent them from ubiquitously affecting other facets of their life. Stressors, then, may become simply “bumps” in life for the highly playful individual, while being interpreted as significant events for those who are less playful” (Magnuson & Barnett, 2013) .

While this exploratory research reinforced that adult play is typically “leisure,” given that only a couple of the survey and interview participants rejected the idea of play for adults outright, there may be an underlying belief in the benefits of play across the lifespan that can serve as a foundation for reframing play as a widely accepted lifespan activity.

One interview in particular illustrated my point in regard to the power of play. The woman was in the 50-55 age group and had a very low SMAP score of 5. She runs, cycles, and participates in local athletic events, but the activity she chose as play was needlepoint. She immediately referred to herself as “the least playful/fun person I know” and hoped she wouldn’t “fail” the interview. After I reassured her that there was no way to fail, she explained that needlepoint was play because “it’s something that I like and it’s fun..and it’s social, but it’s a guilty pleasure kind of thing.”

Throughout the interview, she explained that needlepoint was social—she didn't like being dependent on other people for things, but she liked the social aspect of needlepoint. Then she told me that it was creative, but she's very analytical and doesn't "do creative...I do spreadsheets." She loved the learning aspect of it and also said her needlepointing was play because it was spontaneous, and "I'm not, I mean I'm not very, not at all, I'm not a spontaneous person."

She went on to explain that most of the needlepoint items she makes she gives away as gifts and that there was a longevity thing to it, "which is very...I don't know...very sentimental. And I'm not a sentimental person...at all."

So within this play activity, this person who isn't playful, isn't particularly social, isn't spontaneous, isn't creative and isn't sentimental, spontaneously gets together with other women to do creative projects that she enjoys sharing with friends and family. Of course, she's learning to do needlepoint, but in all likelihood, what she's really learning is a way of being in the world that is completely different than how she has primarily functioned for 50-plus years. This, to me, encapsulates the power of play—the indirect learning that takes place that changes how we think of ourselves and relate to others. Imagine what might be possible if we were able to remove the stigma around play, to say that it is not purposeless or a waste of time...how much more freely might we participate and therefore be open to even greater learning?

### **Exploring a Practice of Play Using the Arts**

My studies in social and cultural pedagogy overlapped substantially with my interest in using visual and performing arts as tools for play—especially play that can result in long-term social change. Music, movement and visual art have existed in

virtually every culture throughout history, yet in the United States (and likely much of the Western, or modernized world) we have limited the practice of visual and performing arts (Gell, 1998) . Our focus on *product*—what I call our “American Idol mentality”—has created a culture in which only those who are considered “blessed” with talent, those that can perform or produce a product for mass consumption are the only ones who are permitted to practice.

Virtually all children sing, dance, and do art as soon as their physical and mental development allows. In fact, most of us remember singing our ABC’s or playing “ring around the rosie” as kids. We hopefully also remember finger painting, or having our drawings posted on the refrigerator. Yet, through our socialization process, we no longer play in this way. As children, art, movement and song were ways we connected with each other, ways that we learned, yet these activities had no “learning objective.” It wasn’t about producing great artwork or a beautiful song—it was about the joy of the experience.

Somewhere along the line, most of us remember being told we weren’t good enough. Whether it was at school or by family or friends, we somehow bumped up against the notion that some people had artistic talent and that others did not—*and* that only those with talent should continue to practice visual and performing arts. While it is true that there are people who develop a professional artistic practice who devote years of time and training to perfecting their craft, it does not mean that the arts can *only* be practiced by professionals.

(Even those that do take up an instrument, or dancing do so with the idea of producing an end product. There are very few people who will “play” with sound and movement.)

A research project done in Chicago in 2000 explored the possible outcomes of participation in “informal” arts and found that demonstrate “engaging in informal arts activities may be providing opportunities for people to come together across established divisions of gender, race, ethnicity, age, and occupation. The data also demonstrate that informal arts practices and the venues in which they take place facilitate such boundary crossing” (Wali, 2001, p.224) Additionally they found that people who participated in informal arts (like drumming, choir, community theatre, etc.) cultivated four important skills: relying on collaborative work habits, taking and giving criticism, the practice of tolerance, and acting to change things (Wali, 2001, p.224).

In order to explore the ways in which capitalizing on the benefits of “playing” with the arts might be possible, I created three play events which I called “PlayDates!”. There were several key elements that went into the design of the PlayDates!:

- 1) The description of the event was intentionally vague. Part of the type of play I am interested in is play where we gently step outside of our comfort zones (Vygotsky’s proximal zone of development). Since as adults, we have a strong tendency to only do things that we feel we are good at, I wanted to encourage people who may not have artistic tendencies to explore their creativity.
- 2) I enlisted the help of outside facilitators for two of the three PlayDates!. Although I have dabbled in visual and performing arts, I find that (as in Jazz improvisation) it is helpful if you have a certain skill level in the topic in order to facilitate a

somewhat improvised experience for others. For the first PlayDate! I asked Sarah Spencer to facilitate because she is the person who taught me how to play with visual arts. She is also interested in consulting in using the visual arts to promote creativity in so-called “non-artists” (people who label themselves as such), so it was a good practice evening for both of us. For the second session, I approached Susy Jeanne Manning, who facilitates drum circles. I had not previously met Susy Jeanne and she agreed to facilitate for a greatly reduced fee.

- 3) The instructional designer (and control freak) in me, did create an outline for the evening...which is kind of funny because I really want to create experiences for adults that might mirror free-play. My thinking, though, is that adults are not used to free play, so just inviting them over with a bunch of materials and no direction might not work as well. (For example, even as a writer, it’s much easier to write to a prompt than stare at a blank page.)

Here is the outline for the first two events:

6:15-6:30pm – Meet and greet, snacks

6:30-6:45pm – Introduction, high level information on adult play, introduce facilitator

6:45-8:15pm – Semi-structured art activities, with “noticings” or debriefs after each activity

8:15-8:30pm – Overall debrief and feedback

I posted information about the PlayDates! on my website and shared the link through Facebook and sent an e-mail with the link to my contact list. I also handed out flyers at a women’s networking meeting. The first PlayDate! was called “Exploring

Creativity” and the second one was called “Exploring Sound.” I did not give descriptions of what we would be doing, but on the website I created three scales to help provide some context: a messiness scale, a vulnerability scale, and a physicality scale.

The scales were rated 1 through 5, with 1 being low and 5 being high. I provided also provided a scale key for further explanation (<http://www.danakeller.net/participation-scales.html>).

### **PlayDate! Exploring Creativity**

The first PlayDate! was called “Exploring Creativity.” It was held at my home, out on the patio. In attendance were five women in their 40’s and 50’s and one man, aged 70. Four of the five women were pretty close friends of mine, the other two participants were invited by two of my friends in attendance. The activities for the night were:

- Doodling
- Construction paper creations
- Non-traditional acrylic painting

The doodling activity was done while we chatted about our memories of being visual artists—when we might have come up against being told we weren’t good enough or when we stopped making art. Several people had arts backgrounds, but said that they didn’t make time to practice anymore.

Then Sarah gave us stacks of multi-colored construction paper and scissors and glue sticks. She left us to cut and construct and we all sort of chatted while we were creating. When everyone was about done, we shared why we made what we did.

Finally, we donned aprons and big shirts and stood at a table with bottles of acrylic paint. On the table were all kinds of non-traditional tools (not paint brushes)—

mostly a variety of kitchen tools. After we created a painting in our little area, Sarah asked us to switch sides of the table and add to someone else's creation. We talked about the areas of the paintings that were aesthetically pleasing. We ended with a debrief. These were some of the closing comments:

- “I’m super glad that you did not make us like sing or like...I was thinking you were going to make us like act out a scene. But I do like that...when you talked about stuff from our childhood that made us stop doing things. I, like you...I mean I have an art minor and I stopped doing everything. I love to paint. So I’m going to bring that back into my life. I need to make time to do that.”
- “This has been great. I would absolutely do it again. I love being in touch with my creative side because I don’t do it enough and this was a great outlet for that. I think it’s so important to have that creative side...whatever that is for you.”
- “I loved it. I thought it was really fun. And I’m kind of with [her] on the whole acting something out or having to sing or maybe dance because that’s my uncomfortable zone. This part was my comfort zone. And so, I wouldn’t mind doing that other stuff in a safe environment like this. So I appreciated that you created a safe space for us to be able to openly have our feelings, and um express ourselves through play.”
- “It was fun. I thought it was fun. [Me: You were nervous about coming.] Very. Because I thought we were going to have to perform...dance or do something that I would be very self-conscious about. So no, drawing and...that was fun, what we did tonight. It was fun sharing with everybody, hearing people’s stories. I always like that.”

- “As the night went on, I felt more at ease. Knowing like oh, that everything we were doing I was comfortable with [Another participant: We’re not dancing.]. It’s interesting to me that three of us didn’t want to act or dance or sing in front of people. That’s definitely a different thing.”
- “I had a great time, but I love Dana, so I really came to support my friend and always be here to support her creative outlets, but it was really fun. I especially liked the painting and I liked the conversation with everyone and everything that people were learning from it. [Me: If it wasn’t me and it was sort of an art, free play thing would sign up to do it?] No. Totally no. I would go with Dana or go with my daughter who likes to something more for her temperament. I think there are certain people that are born with more of a creative side and I’m definitely more of the linear thinker...so creative exploration is sort of the opposite of my temperament.”
- “The only reason I’m here is because [another participant] would have beat the shit out of me if I didn’t come. Having said that...actually I fully enjoyed myself. I don’t know...does everybody know each other? [Other participants: no] Because to me it seemed like you guys have known each other for a long time. And there was no cattiness amongst you and I decide...that beautiful bauble I created for [another participant]...I really enjoyed watching you guys with your creations. I get a big thrill out of somebody else who can do something very well that I cannot do, whether it’s changing a tire or a shoe maker or whatever it might be. I can watch them for hours, just because I’m sort of like jealous because I’m not good

at it...so thank you very much for that experience...I didn't consider it play, I just had a good time. I just had a really good time.”

### **PlayDate! Exploring Sound**

The second PlayDate! was called Exploring Sound. It was held at my home, in my living/dining area. We had eight participants (plus I participated as well). All participants were women ranging in age from 26 to 56. Three participants were friends of mine, two were acquaintances, and three were people I had never met that were invited by friends.

The primary activity of the night was drumming. Our facilitator, Susy Jeanne, led us through a variety of percussion activities. Sometimes she directed our patterns, other times she directed our volume. We also did activities where we “passed” our invisible gifts around the circle and played each other’s drums. At one point she turned on music and we played along with the music—also at this time three of us chose to dance with some long, sheer, colorful scarves. Our final activity was creating a meditative musical piece together. We concluded the evening with a debrief. Here were some of the closing comments:

- “I noticed the vibration...like my hands from beating it...went up my arms and so...that occurred to me that I want that to happen more often. So I’m inspired to buy a drum now.”
- “At the end, right before we all started clapping...I think we all went around and did our word...I just had this feeling like I did when I was really young. It’s actually making me teary. My mom used to take me to these gatherings with women and men and it was just really special and it was so safe to sit in that

space. Everyone started clapping or whatever and I was just like ahhhhhhh. It was nice.”

- “I liked the exercise of taking your characteristic or your quality and giving it to somebody else. Because I notice then...because for example mine was inspirational...because I notice then that there are other people I know in the room that inspire me for different reasons and so when you said pass it around it was like, we all have that...we all have every quality.”
- “I really noticed the energy...I was exhausted when I got here tonight. I’m really tired, I just moved...I was so energized I can still feel the vibration...can you guys feel that? And the energy is beautiful. I love that. It’s very cool.”
- “I noticed the freedom that this whole activity. It was very freeing. It was just...freeing.”
- “My favorite part was when you said, this is your time. I thought, oh my god I can’t remember the last time that I didn’t have to worry about a bazillion...even when they leave home you still have to take care of every little thing for everybody on the planet...and so...and I told Dana I’m not musical. I mean I don’t even have any music on my phone. I don’t even have an ipod! I don’t have time for any of that. I listen to the news.”

### **PlayDate! Exploring Games**

My third and final PlayDate! exploration for this project was with the MFA students in the Theatre for Youth program at Arizona State University. The suggestion to include this group was made by Dr. Stephani Etheridge-Woodson who directs the program.

This was the only group that I decided to facilitate myself and this session presented a unique challenge: How do you create play for people who play for a living? I struggled to create a session that would provide them with some of the benefits that participants in the other session received and that were in line with the kind of play for which I am advocating: a mental break, unlimited learning possibilities, connection with others, and a gentle step into the unknown.

I considered using visual art activities (rather than performing arts activities with which they might be too familiar), but I wasn't comfortable enough with my own ability to facilitate. After consulting with fun theorist, play practitioner, and author of *The Well-Played Game*, Bernie de Koven, I opted to create a session that was a combination of theatre- or improv-based games combined with some non-competitive games that might be new to the MFA students.

Our one-hour session had about fourteen participants, mostly women with about three or four men (unfortunately I was unable to find someone to capture the event through photos and video, so this is an approximation based on my memory). The hour went like this:

- Name/sound introductions (commonly practiced by performing artists)
- Walk/stop/run (an InterPlay practice, but similar to other drama warm-ups)
- Group lead and follow (another InterPlay practice, but similar to other drama activities)
- Brussels Sprouts (Weinstein & Goodman, 1980)
- Danish clapping game (Danish clapping game & the copenhagen game collective - DeepFUN.)

- I could talk about... (another InterPlay activity)
- Babbling in partners (another InterPlay activity)
- Group story circle (a widely used drama activity)

As usual, we concluded the session with a debrief discussion. Here were some of the closing comments:

- “There’s a fluidity to the structure I think that allowed for a lot of experimentation without feeling like you had to be right or wrong...it just allowed for a lot more openness and connection.”
- “I really enjoyed your facilitation because you never put yourself as expert in the room, you played with us and we were all equals and that was really lovely.”
- “Yeah, the games shifted, it’s not that you didn’t play by the rules or you changed up the rules, but you were like ‘this doesn’t serve anymore, we’re going to do it this way.’”
- “I liked the awareness of the whole body/mind connection, too, that you went from more physically-based games that highlighted a certain set of skills into more imagination and creativity-based games that I think would allow...or allowed all of us to expose different parts of our personalities and learning styles.”
- “...low risk but high connection and high group mind.”
- “For me, physical work always gets me out of my head and so starting with that and then moving into [storytelling circle] was great.”

- “Things moved in a way that make people really engage with people they may not normally. People couldn’t stay in their cliques or groups.”
- “Yeah, I would categorize what we just did as play. Play to me is anything that is intrinsically enjoyable in and of itself, without something beyond it like a learning objective. The only moments I felt like I wasn’t play was reflecting on each thing. Wondering how...is it possible to make reflection feel more playful or is reflection not a part of play?”
- “Any time there’s a lot of laughter...and there was...is playful.”
- “This is not very scientific, but I feel different now than I did when I came in. I came in and...I had a lot of interactions with folks in the room that were like ‘ehhhh’ [scrunches up face, neck and shoulders] and a lot of our first actions were a little ‘huwahhhh’ and the arc at least physically for me was from that to this like very...I’m sitting on the floor, my legs are out, I’m really relaxed. So in that sense, yes, I totally played, because I totally got to leave whatever it was I was working on the computer ten minutes before I came in this room behind.”
- “There’s a sense of ‘you get to.’ I got to run around and play and shout vegetables. I got to make up my own rules when it served and I got to tell my story. All these reasons to get up and come stay in the room.”
- “I felt more connected. I felt like there was no judgment in the room so that I would kind of put as play. Everybody was making a contribution through agreement so that everybody was working and building together. So I thought it was really awesome.”

- “I think for me, play is a lot about exploration and just being able to explore with really kind of no boundaries or no judgment in some respects I think was incredibly...was just really freeing and that felt very good.”
- “I feel like there’s something that I felt with play and that’s like you don’t know what’s going to happen and that’s what makes it exciting.”

## **Discussion**

Putting play into practice for adults was a challenging task. For the first two groups, it was challenging to get ordinary people to step out of their comfort zones to play. It began with even getting people to sign up to come, not knowing exactly what they were going to be doing. Participants expressed a lot of anxiety around doing activities where they might be singled out or embarrassed.

Participants also echoed some of the concerns that survey and interview respondents mentioned: lack of time and energy because of adult concerns and not making the time to play due to adult responsibilities. Strikingly, though, people felt better once they played—whether it was playing with art, drumming, or playing games. Again, survey results were echoed as participants mentioned feeling more relaxed, gaining more energy, and ‘getting to’ run, play games, etc.

Participants seemed to enjoy participating in a safe environment, free of judgment where nothing was expected or had to be produced. The other recurring theme that appeared in both the interviews/surveys and the PlayDate! sessions was the feeling of being connected to other participants. I provided participants for the first two sessions with a link to provide anonymous feedback. Here was how one participant responded:

I learned that not setting clear expectations can actually have some great benefits in a session. I was reminded that I LOVE spending time with

other women, trying new things and then chatting about how they were personally relevant to us. When dancing, I remembered that I am beautiful and sacred just as I am. I was humbled, reminded that we are all just humans, playing, laughing, making mistakes, dancing around when we find the courage. I was reminded that I have a spirit that connects easily with other people and that I want to spend more time having more intentional, conscious connections. It felt damn good! Also, I learned that an evening of play is a BRILLIANT way to prep for an upcoming event, presentation, exam, etc.

One of the MFA participants followed up with an e-mail expressing his/her feelings about participating in the play session:

I know I came in late and thank you for putting me right back into the fold. I know that I gave you feedback in person but I really want to say that I enjoyed this workshop.

My biggest complaint about workshops similar to this is that there is a lot of standing around explaining rules asking and answering questions and there was none of that with this one. I had the opportunity to talk to the people I was working with and work things out with them and I felt like that was valuable time getting to know people and try things. I would say there was a complete lack of focus on doing things right and it allowed everyone to soar and be themselves. Could have done another hour. Awesome work. Great facilitation. Really a lot of fun. Good luck with it all!

Although these were just three sessions, I felt that the experiences of the participants definitely bore out what I heard from the interview and survey respondents. Going forward, there is much more to be explored in regards to creating safe, *ludic* spaces for adults to explore playfulness and creativity. Some of the questions that remain include: What is the difference between play and leisure for adults? Is it necessary to step outside your comfort zone to experience transformational play? Does it matter whether or not the participants view the activity as play or playful in order to receive the benefits of the experience? Is encouraging reflection antithetical to creating fun play spaces or is there a way in which reflection can be more playful? How do we encourage people who don't typically play to engage in playful spaces?

In answer to the last question, I think that through both research and practice, reframing play as a lifelong activity can help people be more open to participating in and receiving the benefits from engaging in play.

### **Why Reframe Play?**

As a student of social pedagogy, I believe that play is an often overlooked and underrated, yet highly effective, educational tool that can be practiced for social change. Play is much more than a developmental activity for children—it can retain its importance throughout the lifespan.

Play creates opportunities for deeper learning that may or may not be present in other types of learning environments. Play across the lifespan has been shown to impact learning (A. Y. Kolb & Kolb, 2010) , creativity (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006) , innovation (Dodgson, Gann, & Salter, 2005) , resilience (Jindal-Snape et al., 2013), relationship (Connery, John-Steiner, & Marjanovic-Shane, 2010; Holzman, 2009) and wellbeing (Magnuson & Barnett, 2013) .

Based on my research and personal experience, I have created my own definition of play as “The joy of being fully present and engaged in *process*, without fear of failure... a pleasant venture into the unknown.” This definition alludes to three important characteristics of play that make it a valuable form of learning and a tool for social change: presence of the participants, engagement by participants, and a focus on process over product.

### **Presence and Play**

Being fully present in play is closely related to Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow. *Flow*, or *autotelic experience*, is when we are so engrossed in an enjoyable experience, for its own sake, that we are not really concerned about the outcome

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p. 824). His numerous studies have indicated that people who spend more time in *flow* experience a greater level of happiness and that playful activities (creative activities, games, music, etc.) are common sources of *flow* experiences.

When we are experiencing *flow*, we tend to tune out anything around us that does not pertain to whatever it is we are doing. This explains why participants in my research often stated that they experienced getting a new perspective, recharging, and taking a break or a breath.

### **Engagement and Play**

Play also allows participants to be fully engaged in what they are doing. While engagement may be closely related to being fully present, I suggest that engagement also implies being fully embodied. This is perhaps the area of greatest potential for play as a tool for personal and social change.

As Rotas and Springgay (2013) write, “Becoming-artistic, or pedagogy for that matter, then involves disrupting habit and the striated spaces that tether bodies to routine and representation. It is an opportunity to think otherwise and to experience being in the world in a different way” (p. 284). This could be why my research participants repeatedly mentioned that their play activity was a “break from the ordinary.”

The embodied nature of play can “inhabit the insides of the flesh and engenders other ways of living differently” (p. 288). Later I will discuss how what we experience within the frame of play can then be taken out in the world as a different way of being.

### **Process and Play**

Another beneficial characteristic of play is its focus on *process* (play activity) over *product* (work activity). For play to be used as a tool for personal and social change, both the play participant and the practitioner must embrace the idea that “work” and

focusing on the end result do not always provide the best end result. Overcoming our Western cultural focus on being productive, and measurement of that productivity, provides one of the biggest opportunities for reframing play. In fact, in a laboratory study, Glynn (1994) found that labeling tasks as ‘play’ “affected a *means* orientation, which in turn, resulted in a higher performance quality and evaluations.” On the other hand, labeling a task as ‘work’ “affected an *ends* orientation, resulting in lower performance quality and evaluations” (p. 42).

A key attribute of my definition of play is that it is a “pleasant venture into the unknown.” When we are present and engaged in play activities, we are saying that we are not committed to an end result. As Rotas and Springgay write, “When we experience with our bodies, we implicate ourselves in a process that is not-yet-known and guarantees nothing” (Rotas & Springgay, 2013, p.284) .

Recently I was collaborating with a colleague on a proposal for a workshop at a conference on aging. She is intrigued by my research into play across the lifespan, but—given her common association with play as a childhood activity—was still confused on what exactly I meant by “adult play.” I explained it to her like this:

We are obsessed with what we can measure, which means there must be a product or goal in mind. Her work with college-level educational programs for “third-age” adults demonstrated this focus. The goal of the classes is to learn a language, create a piece of art, write a memoir, etc., which participants were doing and engaged with the coursework, but the administrators of the program were interested in why the adults in the courses by-in-large did not form community with the other course participants (given that loneliness is a common challenge for third-age adults).

I asked her to think about when we send children out to play. We assume that they are learning when they are out playing...social skills, physical coordination, etc. But when they come in from playing, it would be absurd to try to measure that learning. How much better is your eye/hand coordination, Johnny? Are you better at resolving conflict now than you were two hours ago, Susan? The concept seems ridiculous, yet all adult learning (all formal education, really) is goal focused, so that we can measure the learning that took place. Participants take classes to learn how to *do* something, and at the end of the class, there is a *product*—the thing you have made or learned to do. What about the learning that takes place that is more difficult or impossible to measure? What if we created *ludic* environments where participants came to play with words or paint or clay or history? Who might be drawn to participate and how might they learn if the curriculum was set up so that participants played together with these things...without any expectation of producing some sort of final product?

As adults, our primary understanding of learning is that the goal is to produce something. The joy of learning without a goal has long been drummed out of us, despite the fact that exploratory learning—*playful* learning—is where we can more easily build community. Kids do not typically make friends in the classroom; they make friends on the playground. As adults, where are our playgrounds? There are very few spaces where we can come together to be fully present and engaged in process, without fear of failure. “With playfulness, difficult situations are perceived as challenges to be raised, occasions to learn, and possibilities to increase one’s competence and skills. Furthermore, mistakes are *no longer considered failure but rather a possibility to learn and to grow*. In

adulthood, playfulness crosses the boundaries of play and extends to all life situations” (Guitard, Ferland, & Dutil, 2005) (italics are mine).

### **Play and Vulnerability**

By adulthood, we know all too well the feeling of embarrassment, of looking silly or stupid, and as a result, we try to avoid situations where we might feel that way—to the point that we will make decisions that could be detrimental to our health and wellbeing in order to avoid embarrassment (Harris, 2006). In fact, this issue was mentioned by participants in several of my play sessions.

Since play has been framed as a child’s activity, adults may be reluctant to engage in play and instead will continue to participate in more structured activities within their comfort zones. Therefore, people taking singing classes are probably already good at singing. Participants in writing courses likely already have some proficiency in writing. What about the unwritten poems and stories of those people who long ago were labeled or labeled themselves as “not good writers” or the unsung songs of those who “can’t sing”?

Practitioners working toward social change, like socially engaged artists and social pedagogues, work with communities by listening, building trust, and creating spaces where people can feel comfortable being creative. They lessen the possibility for embarrassment and encourage physical and emotional connection within the community in which they are working. When we create safe environments where people can try new things, without fear of judgment or failure, without a focus on producing something “good,” that is play. Play is a *ludic* space (A. Y. Kolb & Kolb, 2010) where we can learn through doing, and because doing something new or differently makes us

vulnerable, we tend to make new connections and build relationships with the people with whom we are playing (Connery et al., 2010).

As social scientist and best-selling author Brené Brown says, “Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path” (C. B. Brown, 2012, p.34) .

While the artist, pedagogue, or other practitioner can work to create safe spaces for play, learning and connection, participants (you and I) must step forward to try new things and explore outside our comfort zones. New studies show that, contrary to scientific thought in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, our brains do not stop learning and changing. Research is showing that our brain retains some level of neuroplasticity throughout our lives—our experiences have the ability to modify our brain structure long after brain development is complete (around the age of 25) (B. Kolb & Whishaw, 1998) . A 2000 study that compared the brains of London taxi drivers to those of bus drivers demonstrated that the hippocampus of the taxi drivers’ brains was larger, due to the fact that they were constantly having to find new ways to navigate the city, rather than drive prescribed routes (Maguire, Woollett, & Spiers, 2006) .

If our brain continues to make new connections when we have new experiences, then becoming creatures of habit is not good for our brains! Play is an excellent way to get into our bodies, to exercise our brains and to see and understand situations, ourselves, and other people in new ways—something that even with a current focus on leisure as play, the adults in my research readily pointed out. Play is a way to frame activity where

we can construct new meaning. As Marjanović-Shane says, “ ‘play’ is a separate activity frame, a separate zone of existence in which space, time, relationships between participants and the roles they play, rules of behavior, and goals of activity are different and separate from the ongoing ‘here and now’ existence” (Marjanović-Shane & Beljanski-Ristić, 2008, p.102) . We must dare to experiment with creating new frames.

The key to long-term social change, though, is that once practitioners and participants create these play frames, those new understandings must move beyond that “separate zone of existence” into the real world. Quoting Vygotsky, Marjanović-Shane makes the point that “although within the scope of the imaginary play frame, participants can create vivid and strong lived-through experiences, it is only in the process of externalization that these experiences can be transformed into true insights, either cognitive or emotional. When and if externalized, experiences from within the play chronotope (frame or space) can have effects both on the culture and on the individual” (Marjanović-Shane & Beljanski-Ristić, 2008, p.103) .

Because of our focus on measurement, we miss out on understanding how the learning that takes place in adult play activities is applied back in the real world. It is when we take our new ways of seeing and knowing outside of the play space that we change ourselves and the world around us—but since the application of our newfound skills or understanding is difficult to measure (especially because sometimes it can take years until we fully understand or become aware of what we’ve learned from play experiences), we may not fully realize that impact.

### **The Myth of the Work/Play Dichotomy**

There is a great opportunity to begin to see play and work as existing on a continuum, rather than as opposites. Work can be fun and play can be serious, yet, with

further study, it is unlikely that most adults would frame work and play in this manner. While most of us would agree that “learning” is a worthwhile and productive activity, because the learning that takes place during play is less goal-oriented, we may still discount the activity as “purposeless” or “wasting time.”

Semiotics—the study of signs and symbols and the analysis of communication—can provide some assistance in reframing work and play. The semiotic square was developed by Greimas and Rastier (in collaboration with other scholars) as a way of analyzing opposing concepts (Algirdas Julien Greimas : The semiotic square / signo - applied semiotics theories.). While I am a complete novice in semiotics, I became intrigued with the semiotic square as an analytical tool to more deeply examine, and hopefully help move past, the work/play dichotomy.

With a semiotic square, the two opposing concepts are put at the top two corners (Term A and Term B in figure 4). In the bottom two corners are placed the terms “not-A” and “not-B.” The remaining terms (numbered 5-10 in Figure 4) result from combining the other terms in the square.

### Structure of the semiotic square

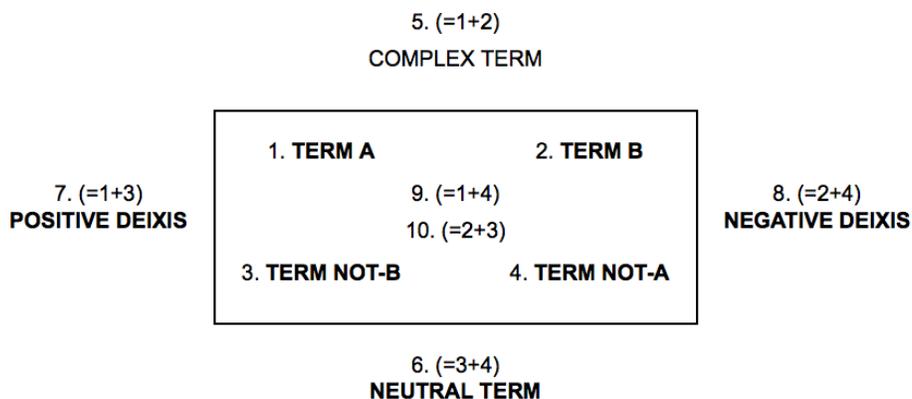


Figure 4: Structure of a semiotic square as presented by By Louis Hébert, Professor, Université du Québec à Rimouski <http://www.signosemio.com/greimas/semiotic-square.asp#top>

I decided to playfully analyze the terms “play” and “work” using the semiotic square and the Figure 5 diagram was my result.

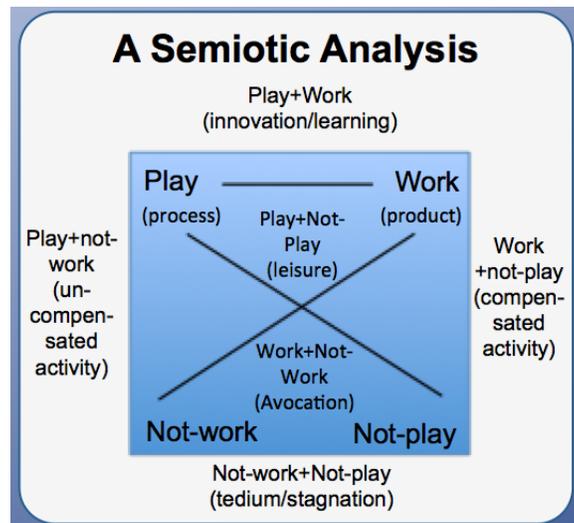


Figure 5: My attempt at creating a semiotic square to explore the false dichotomy between play and work.

Since I am not an expert in semiotics, I have no idea if this is “right” or not, but it feels like a good jumping off place to begin to look at the various facets of work and play and how they are intertwined. Every term I’ve listed is my own attempt at exploring the relationship between work and play, and it would be interesting to use the square as a tool for further exploring this relationship. At the very least, I have included it here to demonstrate that there is room to broaden our concepts of work and play so that they are not mutually exclusive and instead can be combined to produce a wide variety of experiences and outcomes, depending on the participants and the context.

Breaking down these and other dichotomies is one way of dealing with an increasingly complex world. Alfonso Montuori writes:

“...in order to understand complexity we need to change the way we think: a thought that privileges simplicity and reduction and is predicated on the elimination of complexity is not suitable for addressing many

complex phenomena because at the heart of their complexity lies precisely the irreducibility of that complexity. One key element is breaking down limiting hierarchical binary opposition such as science/art, innovation/tradition, serious/playful, order/disorder...post dichotomous ways of thinking that reflect the complexity of life and do not attempt to reduce it to mutilated simplicity and disjunction of binary oppositions” (Montuori, 2003, p.239) .

Play provides a space in which opposing ideas can be held at the same time because we get to create “what is so” rather than be confined to an external reality. Stepping outside of “reality” can allow us to explore new possibilities for how to interact, new solutions for issues, and see each other in new ways. With technology and globalization our world is becoming more and more complex, and rather than strive to change the ways in which we interact, overall the Western world (particularly Americans) have dug our heels into traditional, dualistic thinking leading us to the polarization we have now in politics, religion, and just about every other aspect of our lives (Montuori, 2003) .

Another dualism that overlaps with play/work is our perception of mind/body. “Mind/body dualism is gender coded and encodes gender hierarchy. Mind is coded masculine; body is coded feminine; and the mind is superior to and ought to control the body” (Meyers, 2004, p. 77) . In discussing this mind/body dualism, Meyers states that this “somatophobia” is so entrenched in Western culture that we don’t even have the language to talk about an embodied self, hence she coined the terms *psycho-corporeal agency* and *psycho-corporeal identity*. Meyers makes the point that our bodies are more than just a medium of communication—they also store meaning; in fact in some cases are the principal medium of certain types of knowledge and that our bodies and minds together create our identity. Therefore, “we cannot understand individual subjectivity and

agency, never mind social relations, if we reduce psycho-corporeal identity to a purely mental phenomenon or if we dissolve it into the cross-currents of discourse” (Meyers, 2004) .

Indeed, when I began to search for a term to talk about the transformative nature of fully embodied play, I turned to the “clunky neologism” (Meyers’ words) as well, which is how I stumbled across Meyers’ work. *Transformative psycho-corporeal play* is play that takes into consideration a fully embodied self, that values bodies in pedagogy, and views that pedagogy in relation to knowledge in the making (rather than as a thing already known) (Ellsworth, 2004).

I believe it is this type of embodied play that is most threatening because it is when we are most vulnerable. I believe it was at the root of participants’ anxiety in the PlayDates! that I was going to have them sing, dance, or act out a scene. This kind of embodied work can be much more threatening than activities that don’t use as much of our bodies or call on us to be physically singled out.

If we want to generate innovative solutions to today’s complex challenges, we must view our world as in motion or “in the making” and recognize that we are not only minds, but also bodies. Rather than treating pedagogy, knowledge, politics, etc. as things already known, embodied play practices can hold a space where we can explore them as things in the making. “The implications of thinking about pedagogy as a politics-to-come imbricate the affective, moving and sensing body in theories of learning. Rather than a pedagogy based on static interpretation and meaning making, we imagine a pedagogy that is moving, emergent, breathing and intimate” (Rotas & Springgay, 2013) .

By reframing play, we can develop and participate in pedagogy and practice that is embodied and views knowledge as “in the making,” which will help us to move past dichotomous thinking to connect in new ways and generate creative solutions to today’s complex challenges.

### **Conclusion**

What do we stand to gain by taking a look at play as a lifespan activity? In what ways has play been pigeonholed as strictly a developmental activity for children? What are the possibilities for using play as a tool for social change?

One clear area where play reframed can contribute to social transformation is in the United States at the intersections of socially engaged practice and social pedagogy. By combining play with these practices, we can create a new field that approaches social change from a different perspective.

Social pedagogy—while practiced in Northern Europe as a more holistic version of social work, and in South America as a form of social work combined with education and activism—is new to North America as a concept and practice. Socially engaged practice is still a widely debated use of the arts: What qualifies as socially engaged practice? Are all art practices that concern social issues “socially engaged practice”? While some have attempted to begin to define the field (Helguera, 2011; Lacy, 1995), there is still no consensus by practitioners on the field’s parameters.

I define socially engaged practice as: “The application of artistic methods within a community, in collaboration with community members, to address an issue of importance in a way that creates a significant space for the possibility of individual and collective agency.”

Since social pedagogy has a longer and more academic history, but is still not widely practiced in the United States, I will harken back to one of the early contributors to the field, German philosopher and educator, Herman Nohl (1879-1960), who, in the 1920's, played a significant part in developing social pedagogy as an “autonomous discipline and a movement” (Schugurensky & Silver, 2013, p. 5) . Nohl asserted that “the specific social pedagogical interventions should focus on social help” and consist of a “holistic educative process based on love, awareness, and human dignity” and “take into account the particular historical, cultural, personal and social contexts of a given situation” (Schugurensky & Silver, 2013, p. 5) .

Given this perspective, I would use Nohl's description to define social pedagogy as: “Specific educational interventions with an individual or community, that are based on love, awareness, and human dignity and take into account the particular historical, cultural, personal, and social contexts of a given situation.”

With these definitions, the practice of *artistic social pedagogy* could make use of play as a tool for social change. Even though this is a new term, artists and pedagogues are already taking risks to create new spaces for play. The great social pedagogues of our time understood how to create spaces in which people could feel free to experiment without fear of failure and get to know each other in new ways: Paolo Friere used games to teach language in a way that recognized and respected the equality of teacher and learner, Boal used the arts to explore power in relationships and upset the status quo. Social pedagogy is a holistic practice of education, activism and social work—a “head, heart, hands” practice (Schugurensky & Silver, 2013, p. 3) —which makes it important that our play/work includes the body, not just the mind.

According to Bateson (1972), play is a framed activity in which rules of interpretation differ from the rules of interpretation “outside” the frame (Marjanović-Shane & Beljanski-Ristić, 2008) . Miles Horton’s Highlander Folk School is a great example of a place where play, art, activism, and education overlap. He created a space where people came together to play and establish relationships in ways that they could not in the “real world.” Yet the time that people like Rosa Parks spent there—storytelling, singing, sharing meals, engaging in dialogue—engaged the whole person and enabled those participants to go out into the real world and dare to apply what they learned (Carter, 1994).

The concepts I have explored through my research and exploration of the practice of play across the lifespan may reflect the struggle in my own mind to reconcile my experiences and intuition with concepts from great minds and experts in many different fields:

- Ellsworth’s “pedagogy in relation to knowledge in the making” and knowledge as a thing in motion, not a thing that is already made.
- Meyers’ concepts of *psycho-corporeal agency* and *psycho-corporeal identity*.
- Holzman’s Vygotskian-based notions that development is an ongoing process of creating who you are by performing who you are not.
- Montuori’s idea that improvisation and post-dichotomous thinking are essential to coping with and creating in our increasingly complex world.
- Springgay’s views on embodied learning and politics in-the-making.

- Callois' idea that "An outcome known in advance, with no possibility of error or surprise, clearly leading to an inescapable result, is incompatible with the nature of play" (as quoted in Tekinbaş & Zimmerman, 2006, p. 126)

I have tried to incorporate these concepts along with those of play scholars of our time like Brian Sutton-Smith, Dr. Stuart Brown, and Dr. Peter Gray to emphasize the important opportunity that lies before us to reframe play and use it as a tool for social transformation.

If we are going to achieve social change, we must do more than engage in dialogue. We must take risks of trying new experiences with no guaranteed outcome, of looking silly. We must collaborate in ways that engage our whole bodies and move past either/or thinking. Play creates a space where this type of engagement is possible. Reframing play so that we can move past our limited, Western association of play with childhood development is one of the first important steps in being able to create these new possibilities.

In a 2007 video from the Performing the World conference, Ana Marjovanić-Shane said: "...[in play] you create an imaginary world...in which you can start to see the future and possibilities that are not yet here. So it's something completely turned toward the future which is very hopeful because of the energy of connecting everybody and giving a power of multiple visions coming together" (Spirito, 2007).

There are a number of professionals from a variety of fields who are working diligently to advance the study of play across the lifespan. Their research forms the basis for the advocacy work I hope to do, encouraging people in all areas both inside and

outside the academy to see play in a different way and to experience the benefits of experiencing play in all areas of their lives.

There are also practitioners like Cynthia Winton-Henry and Soyinka Rahim who invite people to join them for “Race Dances” or “Waking up White”—embodied ways of playing with issues of race and racism ([www.interplay.org](http://www.interplay.org)). Lois Holzman and her colleagues are creating play spaces to address real social issues at Eastside Institute in New York ([www.eastsideinstitute.org](http://www.eastsideinstitute.org)). Many other socially engaged artists are creating these play spaces as well; however until we can reframe play so that it is not a term of condescension or derision, viewed as purposeless and a waste of time, we will be hard pressed to find artists that will claim it.

Change involves risk, and in order to create a space where play, social pedagogy and socially engaged practice can exist together to generate social change, there must be people willing to step out...and people willing to accept them or at least consider their efforts. It is in that spirit that I hope you have received this article. For the past three years, I have played in the spaces of academia, socially engaged practice and social pedagogy. It is my hope to continue to play there. I am reaching out to collaborate with you, the reader, to see how we might play together in the space between research and practice.

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