

Using Collaborative Play to Developing an Enriching Adult Learning Experiences Through a Theater Arts Perspective

In this research, I would like to understand how the use of collaborative play in the adult learning environment influences the way that learners participate together in the process of finding deeper understanding of concepts and issues. To this end, I would like to consider how a theater arts perspective suggests ways to plan and implement collaborative play in a way that is effective for adult learners.

In addressing adult learners specifically, I am considering that adults may represent a set of special needs in learning that might be addressed differently than if both adults and children were regarded together. Because adult learners have typically been involved in some type of formal schooling in youth, they may have developed some perspective on how learning “is supposed to work” and have been influenced by past learning experiences. In many cases, a high proportion of learning in school may have taken place through what might be called a “traditional” style, involving didactic teaching in which teachers served as subject-matter experts and communicated the content to students in a “one-way” direction. In other cases, other styles such as experiential learning or problem-based learning may have been used with a teacher as a guide to encourage students to learn from each other and through direct hands-on activities as well. In either case, adults have developed some perspective of how learning works and may still consider learning to be an individual process, or they may continue to carry biases about preferred classroom styles or even what constitute a learning opportunity. I

would like to suggest that adult learners might have the chance to expand their notion of a “learning opportunity” beyond structured classrooms that are associated with formal institutions and consider a range of others, such as community meetings, study groups, book clubs, and any other other gatherings of professional or personal colleagues. Further, I would propose that by seeking and participating in these learning opportunities along with other people rather than in individual or isolated ways, learning that happens might enrich all involved through the sharing of diverse experiences.

Why might adult learners need any improvement or change at all in their learning opportunities? I suspect that many adult learning situations, and the notion of “adult education” itself, implies that learning is intended to help adults develop skills that are useful or necessary for professional skills development (work-related training, certification, literacy) or for personal life enhancement (exploration of hobbies or emerging personal interests). Certainly, in many such learning endeavors, collaborative play *may* happen in the course of the experience. Still, I consider that there are types of opportunities in which learning collaboratively may be a critical component of supporting deeper understanding of the subject matter as well as the relationships between the learners. In learning opportunities in which some issue of social significance is relevant, learners may gain deeper understanding as diverse points of view are exposed and learners are able to recognize and appreciate complexities of an issue that become more transparent when that happens. For example, suppose a community group is meeting to discuss the issue of increasing littering in their local neighborhood. Each individual learner brings unique perspective, memories, and knowledge of the situation, perhaps as well as pre-existing biases about likely best solutions and assumptions about root

causes. Rather than simply regard this meeting as a decision-making or problem-solving process, I would consider such a gathering to match the criteria of a learning opportunity - not only is there potential for the participants to learn from each other, but also there may not even be a formal “teacher” or “leader” of any sort. Collaborative learning, therefore, may take place in this situation by the way that the learners participate in the process, perhaps by brainstorming the causes of the increase of litter, reflecting upon effects of litter, becoming aware of other community changes that may have contributed to the increase of litter, etc. Collaboration is needed in the learning here not only because there may be no single formal expert and so knowledge must be shared in a distributed way, but also because the learners may need to find common ground within their attitudes, for example, or come to agreement on next steps, which themselves may involve activities that require involvement of many people rather than tasks to be done by individuals.

Following from this, why might collaborative “play” be considered as a specific framework from which to view collaboration? From my current meaning, two primary ideas define what it means to play. First, play suggests that activity is taking place that is enjoyable and fun to the person so engaged, such that the specific way of behaving has not been imposed or from an outside influence or preplanned but rather can regulated more spontaneously “in the moment”. Second, play suggests that freedom and flexibility is welcomed in the situation, where strict notions of “right” and “wrong” are abandoned and persistence toward goals is suspended so that curiosity and experimentation (including failed experimentation) are encouraged. Collaborative play in learning is then consistent with this idea, where learners may join in their play with each other at the same time (although the specific playful behaviors being

exhibited by the individuals need not be exactly the same). One possibility is that adulthood play is related to childhood play but is much less observed or used. Hypothetical explanations for this might be among the following:

- 1) the desire to play becomes lost once adult learners focus on the practical nature of their learning
- 2) adults perceive that play is less useful or even a source of distraction from learning and therefore avoid it
- 3) adults do not need to play because they have since developed other more effective mechanisms for learning

I think that one possibility is that children have a natural ability to play, and that it is abundantly accessible to them as a tool for coming to understand the world and their own abilities, needs, wants, and interests. A core proposal that I make is that adults have the same ability to play and are at least as skillful at play, if not more so now, due to having spent a great amount of time playing previously in life. What I suggest then is that adults have not lost the ability to play, but rather the tendency to play has been *masked* by other influences. I suspect that some of these may include hesitations about being observed or judged by others while engaged in play, lessening tendency to allow oneself ample time for learning, perceptions about one's own "maturity" and other attitudes or oversights that may become a barrier to play.

I believe that by using a theater arts perspective, awareness of one's own ability to engage in collaborative play may be restored into adult learning. After developing some interest and brief exposure to principles and methodologies in theater performance over the past few years, I have come to see how some of these elements may be applicable to learning. Generally, theater principles (internal) are used by people to develop a creative product in the form of a performance to an audience (external). As a whole, this process is called "Theater".

In my own experience, I have been prompted to consider that the principles may be used for a completely different purpose, which is to create a product of understanding in a learning situation. I suggest that in this form, the creative product is an internal, reflective one rather than an external one. Further, I suggest that two core principles are particularly useful for creating the learning product.

First, one principle, which I will call the “people principle”, is that an actor take on the identity of another person rather than the self in order to create a believable character. In a performance, this character benefits the audience by supporting the story being presented. In learning, this matter of taking on an alternative identity benefits the learner herself or himself. It opens the way for a person to establish empathy for another person, take on and appreciate an alternative point of view, and temporarily suspend one’s one firmly held beliefs, biases, and tendencies. Because of an adult’s existing perspective of how learning “is supposed to work”, utilizing this principle may make it less likely for that adult to revert of his or her standard learning habit. If adult learners are able to become skillful at switching between identities in such a way, this may be one way for a learner to more thoroughly explore, expose, and internalize the diverse perspectives that are useful for kinds of learning involving complex social issues, as mentioned previously.

A second principle, the “idea principle”, is that an actor willingly engages in the exploration of a fantasy situation in which the bounds of reality are broken, and possibilities may be considered which have nothing to do with practical daily life. In performance, this also serves to support the story because the actor appears to be “buying in” to the fantasy that has been created. In learning, the idea principle might help learners to temporarily accept the

strange, bizarre, or extreme possibilities with the prospect that this will generate new and creative ideas that might not be accessible while regarding oneself in the actual world. This creates a safe environment for learning in which experimentation is welcomed and the freedom of play is fundamental. Additionally, it is not just one person that adopts the fantasy situation - all learners are in complete agreement and adopt it collectively. In learning that involves complex issues, understanding can be difficult because there can be such a vast set of the available knowledge bits (including facts, experiences of people, observations, feelings, etc.).

By using the people principle and the idea principle to develop opportunities for collaborative play, I believe that people might become better prepared to focus on certain groups of these knowledge bits while disregarding others and then repeat this process several times so that one has eventually considered a wide variety of permutations of the available knowledge. By collaborating in play, learners will have supported each other in doing this and also will have found some common ways of understanding while also benefiting from the experience of the others. Through a theater arts perspective, collaborative play becomes a safe activity with the idea that a learner is free from judgment - "it wasn't really *me* showing that behavior, I was instead experimenting with a new state of mind." Additionally, the theater arts perspective supports fun in learning - use of physical movement, voice, posture, and dialogue with respect to the people principle and idea principle can be used in highly flexible ways and provide great opportunity for humor. Finally, collaborative play is consistent with a theater arts perspective since both involve *trust* in others and *agreement* that all of the learners maintain and explore fantasy situations together.