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The Pedagogy of Play in Teaching of Reading: Low Tech and High Tech Interactive Reading Methods

Elizabeth Klein

Hunter College, ekeklein1@gmail.com

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What are the implications for play-based learning within the context of teaching reading? What are the advantages of play integration in reading programs, and how can teachers implement play within a reading program? Which strategies and approaches can enhance the teaching of language arts and reading programs? This article will establish the value and purpose of play-based instruction to understand how to integrate play into reading. Integrating playful experiences into reading instruction can be accomplished with minor adjustments to a lesson or intervention or may be part of a more extensive project such as integrating digital technology.

The Value and Purpose of Play

What is the value and purpose of play? Play is essential for a healthy mind and body. Children explore the world around them through playful interactions and discover new roles. Play is practice for real-life experiences later in life (Gray, 2017). Playful interactions allow children to use their imagination for new roles later in life. Playing a firefighter, teacher, or doctor engages them in imaginary scenarios in which they enact real-life situations. As children play, there is a rehearsal for handling conflicts. Play during childhood is a trial and error. It is a time in life to take risks and learn from successes and mistakes.

Play is a natural part of growth and development in humans and the animal kingdom. Even young mammals play (Mardell et al., 2023, p. 38). As lion cubs, puppies, or kittens play, they take steps toward independence. Play also contributes to healthy development of the brain. Play improves cortical functioning (Siviy, 2020). Play increases neurological and brain activity in young humans. Play-based instruction ignites brain neural networks and creates new activity (Rushton et al., 2010), which increases neurological wiring—increased stimulation and activity through play help to increase activity in the neurons. "*As neurons fire together, they wire together*" (Hanson, 2009, Hebb, 1949). Play promotes the learning and development of language and spatial relations. (Hassinger-Das et al., 2017). Additional benefits of play are an increase in reasoning skills, communication skills, and incidental learning of new vocabulary words.

Play is universal to all cultures, even with variations in how children play (Mardell et al., 2023). For some students who struggle with learning, adding an element of fun and play makes learning more joyous. Promoting a culture of joyous learning is responsive and thus reflects more culturally responsive planning and instruction (Muhammed, 2023). When supported as guided play or purposeful play, the purpose of play can enhance learning through increased engagement.

How can the power of play be harnessed and shaped for educational purposes? Early childhood education programs traditionally have incorporated play-based methods and discovery learning as the mainstay of instructional programs. What are the implications of extending play-based practices beyond the early grades? An extensive study of play-based pedagogies, The Pedagogy of Play (POP) Project Zero (2015) out of Harvard University, supports the value of play integration. This study examines how children learn through play and ways to integrate play into a play-based framework for teaching (Mardell et al., 2023). The study, conducted in collaboration with The International Billund School in Denmark and the Lego corporation, concludes that play integration is an immersive process in which students learn as they play. The authors define "*play as a powerful means for children to discover the world around them*" (Mardell et al., 2023, p. 6). Why should play-based pedagogies be integrated into reading programs?

Making means of text requires skills such as decoding, word recognition, and understanding of vocabulary. However, comprehension of text requires the ability to understand the meaning of the text. Students must be able to visualize ideas and concepts to build meaning. Some students have the skills to do this naturally but need more motivation. Other students may desire to read but need more support with skills, guidance, or practice with one specific area or the other.

Teaching reading requires a combination of teaching skills and ways to motivate students to read. Whatever the reading level or ability, most students will enjoy reading and read more often when they connect to the text in one way or another. Not all reading material that students read in school is enticing to them. Play-based methods and integration can increase motivation and engagement with the reading if used flexibly with the student in mind. Play-based methodologies are student-centered by nature and thus should be considered for motivational purposes, as well.

Low-Tech Strategies and Approaches

Exploration with Sounds and Words

What better way to teach students to love learning new words and sounds than to integrate playful experiences into learning phonics? When students create letters out of clay or write a re-invented story, it is far more motivational and likelier to stick with the 'drill and kill' methods or overuse worksheets.

Playing with sounds and words can take the drudgery out of learning or re-learning sounds and words. While some students naturally learn the alphabetic principles by learning decoding strategies independently as part of the reading

process, others benefit from multisensory approaches. Methods such as the Orton-Gillingham reading method and similar phonics-based methods integrate multisensory approaches for decoding.

The *VARK* (Visual, Auditory, Read/Write, and Kinesthetic) method is primarily used to teach vocabulary to new and Multilingual learners. These methods use the senses as natural companions for play integration and play-based pedagogies. What might this look like in a lesson?

Play-integration and multisensory approaches work in tandem. Technical aspects of learning to decode can become less taxing and more fun. While these methods are effective for individual instruction and small groups, integration is possible in a whole-class lesson. For example, a teacher models sound and make it fun to stretch out sounds and make gestures to indicate the sound. Choral speaking can engage students and ensure that all students master the teaching sequence. Another way to implement this is with station teaching. Teachers with support professionals such as teacher's assistants or paraprofessionals can implement the teaching of sound drills through flashcard games, letter/sound Bingo, and other games.

Interactive Storytelling- Pure and Simple!

Interactive storytelling strategies engage students in multi-modal approaches to teaching a fictional story. Interactive storytelling is typically aimed at preschool settings or used in the early grades. However, there are newly devised methods such as 'choose-your-own-adventure' stories and interactive fiction. Although interactive story materials are available for purchase with a wide variety of options for various grade levels, it is possible to create, adapt, and even engage students in creating interactive stories that are visually appealing, engaging, and fun to read as a class, in small groups or individual reading sessions. An example of an interactive method for young children is using multisensory approaches that use visual, tactile, and kinesthetic approaches. For example, teachers may use a felt board with representations of the characters and objects that relate to the story to help convey the story. A familiar story like *Pete the Cat* might be a good idea. *The teacher reads the story to the students, prompts them to retell questions, and calls them to the felt board to select a picture representing the answer. The teacher also asks for the student to talk about the felt piece. This helps to reinforce language and engage them in the process. If a student selects Pete's groovy shoes, the teacher asks questions. After that, the teacher asks another student to come up and take a turn. Once that sequence is completed, the felt board can be used to sequence or retell the story. After a story is read aloud, teachers can lead students in a dance or movement activity while playing music to accompany the story or theme.*

There are other types of interactive stories and applications for storytelling and writing. Other types of interactive stories are choose-your-own-adventure stories and interactive fiction stories. A choose-your-own-adventure story is one in which the plot and the ending change depending on the reader's choice. These stories are available for purchase, or teachers can create their own. Interactive fiction works in the same way. Another idea is to have students work in groups to create their own stories with multiple endings. The process of story writing takes multiple steps but engages students in a creative activity in which exploration and play are part of the process. Bookcreator is used to integrate digital tools. *Com* is recommended. The use of Bookcreator.com will be discussed later in the article.

Dramatic Role Play

Dramatic role-play is a practical and fun method for students of any age. It is an interactive reading methodology that provides students with clear directions on interpreting the reading and eventually acting out parts of a story. Students can also be assigned readings and asked to interpret part of the chapter; questions can begin with why or how for deeper comprehension. An excellent method of teaching reading comprehension is through creative interpretation and character re-invention. Role-play opens up a dialogue between students, providing a more personalized approach to character analysis and interpretation. Dramatic role-play also provides an opportunity for collaboration. As students prepare for their performance, they plan and collaborate. Students plan, invent dialogue, and rehearse to deliver the best performance possible. For younger students, supporting role-play may mean changing the classroom space and adding props and costumes.

Younger children enjoy playing dress-up and acting out parts. Acting out parts promotes spontaneous interactions and provides opportunities for conversation. Teachers can group students, provide a cue card, and let them enjoy it. They can choose a scene within an assigned chapter or focus on another story aspect. Acting out parts creates a sense of understanding the character while providing room for play and creative expression. This flexible method also works for teaching adolescent students. Having students act out different roles helps them understand the character's emotions, actions, and motives. This way, students are more apt to read and interpret the book from their point of view. This form of dialogic Reading helps students with fluency and comprehension.

Live Action Role Play (LARP)

Another form of role-play comes from gaming. For teachers, a Live Action Role Play (LARP) based on gaming principles is an inexpensive, no-tech

option that brings a story to life. Students can use their imagination and even collaborate with the teacher to best meet learning goals for the assignment. This form of dramatic role-play is known as *non-digital interactive storytelling*. An example of a LARP is *Dungeons and Dragons*, in which game players act out parts such as 'master.' The 'master' controls the narrative while the other players act out their characters as realistically as possible (Roth, 2016). A teacher would assign a reading or read to the students for classroom use. She would then assign groups. Players decide on the goals of the game.

The intended purpose of using dramatic role-play in teaching a story or fiction is to deepen comprehension. Dramatic role play is an experiential form of learning through guided play and dramatic readings of the play. The teacher decides on how parameters of the role play would be set, such as passages students had to read before inventing the game/role play and whether or not the role play would include any kind of writing assignment, such as a draft or a reflection at the end of the process. Although the teacher would have to do some planning to ensure adequate space to act out the roles, enough time in the schedule, and plan for any re-writes to occur, it is a way to get students engaged in Reading and comprehend better.

Dialogic Reading

Dialogic Reading is a conversational dialogue that involves purposeful prompts and questions. This method works with almost any text. The PEER and CROWD strategies for dialogic Reading are methods to support interactive Reading. These acronyms organize questions and routines(Zevenbergen, A. et al. 2003). **PEER refers to (Prompt, Evaluate, Expand, and Repeat. Another acronym, CROWD, refers to – Completion, Retell, Open-Ended, W-Questions, and Distancing (see complete mnemonic and examples below)**

The PEER strategy is recommended for young students, while PEER is appropriate for students in grades three and up. The method works with the scaffolding of questions. Teachers or parents engage in reading with the student instead of silent reading. Teachers and parents intentionally scaffold by posing questions to the student. After eliciting an answer, recording it on a whiteboard or paper can help develop more questions for different purposes. While the dialogue progresses, questions should move from simple to more complex. The exchange can become more playful as the student builds up more confidence. A colorful anchor chart can be posted on the wall, in a notebook, or laminated and placed on student desks to use this technique effectively.

The **CROWD** strategy acronym

Completion,

Retell

Open-ended

Wh-questions (who, what, why, when, and how) are the journalist's questions.

Distancing

Completion questions are fill-in questions.

Examples:

Pete the Cat his new _____ on his feet.

Little Red Riding _____ went to the Big, Bad _____.

Retell Questions are questions that are taken directly from the text.

Examples:

What did *Pete the Cat* wear on his feet?

What is the setting of the story?

Open-ended questions are questions that call for the student's opinion. *Two examples of Open-Ended Questions would be:*

What do you like best about the story?

Which character did you like and why?

Wh- Questions are the journalist's questions – Who? What? Where? When and How?

Examples of Wh questions would be:

Why did the Little Red Riding Hood go into the forest?

Distancing Questions are questions outside of the text that help students connect to the text. Two examples would be:

Have you ever owned a pet?

How does our family cook rice?

Another excellent dialogic strategy is the **PEER** strategy, which is flexible and used by parents, caregivers, and teachers as they read along with the student.

The PEER acronym

Prompt or initiate a conversation with the student,

Evaluate the response,

Expand upon the child's response

Repeat the original answer.

An example of PEER in action would be to display a book and ask a predictive question such as, "What do you think the story is about?" The teacher then

evaluates the response and expands on it. "Yes, I see the bear. Good job, Marcus. That is a bear."

For best results, implement this practice several times a week. For students who need more support, repeat the process and point to specific pictures or text to help them focus and provide more accurate answers.

High Tech Strategies and Approaches

Digital Story Apps, Platforms, Digital Storytelling

Digital story apps have great potential for engagement and motivation for students who enjoy exploration through digital platforms over traditional means of engaging with text. Digital platforms provide visualization of text, greater connection to text schema and background knowledge, and vocabulary development digital platforms (Hoffman, 2023). Digital story-reading apps contain interactive features and digital enhancements such as visuals, links for looking up vocabulary words, sound effects, music, and options for labeling pictures. Accessibility features such as highlighting of text, text-to-speech capability, translation programs, immersive readers, dyslexia font, and recording add to options for project design. Digital enhancements are features that make the narrative come alive (Hoffman et al., 2023). Visuals and media increase comprehension (Salomon, 1979). The more a teacher or caregiver becomes familiar with digital enhancements, the more the digital tool can interact and find new ways to increase comprehension.

Digital storybook platforms such as Bookcreator.com, Storythat.com, and *Storybird.com* are publishing media for educational purposes. These multimedia story tools can deepen the understanding of narrative or expository text as students experiment with many features that allow them to play and experiment with narration, video, and images. As students write and create, they can play and experiment with a multitude of features, royalty-free images, changing font size and color, adding emojis,

Multimedia Approaches

One of the more innovative approaches to teaching reading comprehension reviewed is an integrative approach using AI, digital story writing, the writing process method, and specific tech benchmarks. A study of teachers in a Hong Kong elementary school reveals an inventive use of interactive media and writing techniques. In the study, 82 elementary-level students in Hong Kong participated in a 3-month digital storytelling workshop entitled "*AI, Love, Peace*,

and Robots." Teachers use AI to generate writing topics and research. They also used AI to compare student responses to AI-generated responses. The study outcomes were that students acquired multiple skills, including AI skills, ethics of AI, writing skills, and critical thinking skills (Ng et al., 2022).

As the use of AI increases in the classroom, there is a new understanding of how to use it as a tool for teaching rather than fear it. Some recent examples are using AI to interface with other multimedia tools in a playful, creative approach. For example, AI *Magic Write* can be used in the Canva app to create an educational agenda, slide show, or social media post. Another tip is to create illustrations with an AI tool such as Adobe Firefly to integrate with the Bookcreator e-publishing tool or to embed in a PowerPoint or Word document. The Padlet tool has an AI-generated feature that generates illustrations. The trick is to teach students to use the correct prompts.

VR (Virtual Reality) and AR Augmented Reality

Teaching reading using immersive technologies and virtual realities invites another interactive reading method that holds promise for teaching reading comprehension. VR (Virtual Reality) is an immersive experience replicating a real-life experience with a simulated one. *VR is a* multi-modal and sensory-rich technology for gaming, medicine, and business (Yamada-Rice, D, 2021). VR (Virtual Reality) tools help build prior knowledge in the literacy classroom.

There are different kinds of technologies. Immersive technologies consist of different types of technologies still in the process of refinement. AR (Augmented Reality) is an emerging tool that augments surroundings by adding digital element. It has the power to engage students and harness children's interest in reading (Park et al., 2019).

The use of VR (virtual reality) and AR (augmented reality) in reading is worth considering. These emerging technologies show potential for student engagement and visualization of story elements or details in informational text. Per Rumba et al. (I., 2022), VR is a motivational tool for students who enjoy reading. It stands to reason that gaming is enjoyable to many students. Tools for technology need to connect to the lesson's learning objectives and goals for the unit.

Augmented Reality (AR) is an emerging literacy that can harness children's interest in reading (Park et al., 2019). Augmented Reality (AR) augments surroundings by adding digital elements to simulate a live view (Watts, 2023). This tool is also exceptional for building background knowledge.

Augmented Reality (AR) brings students right into a scene. For example, a great use of AR in the reading class is to simulate a field trip to have students visualize the setting of a story. (Pilgrim et al., 2016). The teacher who wants to build in an experience before introducing a text could bring in a simulation of an environment. For example, she may use AR for virtual museum visits to view Egyptian statues. As part of the setup for the virtual field trip, the teacher would think about the goals and objectives. She then sets the purpose for reading and uses prompts that engage them in guided play.

While many are digital tools, parents and teachers should vet these apps carefully and use them interactively with students, like all other educational tools. Like many other digital apps, safety and security is essential. Also, the promise of AI (Artificial Intelligence) requires informed use of AI. It is necessary to understand and maintain creative thinking and playful interactions.

Adaptations and Modifications for Diverse Learners

To support a growing diverse population, teachers need an understanding of flexible approaches that also spark motivation and engagement. Teaching with multisensory approaches and through multiple modalities is an excellent place to start.

Play-based pedagogies can be adapted, modified, and tailored based on student needs using the *UDL* principles (Universal Design for Learning). For students who need more support, content or presentation mode adaptations can be added. The balance of incidental learning and explicit teaching involves understanding learner needs. For students who need more support with techniques such as modeling, scaffolding, or prompting, it is essential first to observe them in a naturalistic setting while playing with peers.

Teachers promoting play-based classroom learning can begin by creating a playful mindset for selected lessons, activities, and projects. When students play or engage in a playful mindset with peers and adults, they use methods to promote language stimulation. Providing students with more language practice through incidental play helps them pick up new vocabulary words. The teacher can follow through by asking students to use new words in classroom discussions.

Language acquisition is essential for all students; however, students with IEPs (Individualized Education Programs), new language learners, and Multilingual learners need more explicit teaching of new words and more repetition and reinforcement (Spencer et al., 2012). Purposeful selection of vocabulary can be presented to the whole class and reinforced with individuals who need more support.

Other ways to increase accessibility for emergent language learners or students with multiple disabilities are to use visuals, anchor charts, and slide shows. These supports allow access for students with dyslexia and other reading-based disabilities or for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Another adaptation for students who are less likely to engage with a lesson is to offer a menu of choice within an activity. For example, some students may want to read with a peer, while others want to read to a stuffed animal.

Preparation and Special Materials

Keeping a play journal helps gather information for classes and cohorts of students. What works with one cohort may not work with another. A play journal is a diary of ideas implemented to enhance learning within an English Language Arts or reading class context.

Brighten up your worksheets and handouts with realistic and colorful graphics made with applications such as Adobe Firefly or Canva. Adobe Firefly is an AI-generated image maker. It is not free, but educators receive an educational discount. Canva has so many uses for educational purposes. Motivate—students with fun and attractive handouts, posters, anchor charts, and Slide shows. Kami's notetaking application also offers attractive features that allow the creative presentation of teacher-made materials. Keeping a play journal helps gather information specific to your classes and cohorts of students. What works with one cohort may not work with another. A play journal is a diary of ideas implemented to enhance learning within an English Language Arts or reading class context.

Conclusion:

Children learn through play experiences (Vygotsky, L, 1972). Play is valuable for use as part of a language arts program or reading period. Play-based learning engages students and allows them to discover more about themselves. Play-based approaches have the potential for greater language stimulation, increased cooperation, motivation, and engagement. Teachers should consider the integration of play-based methodologies within their reading programs. Changing a lesson involves many ways to include fun experiences, whether adding in wordplay, multisensory experiences, dialogic reading, or digital story projects. While there is a vast body of research on why play-based pedagogies are essential to teaching in the early classroom, there is a need for more research on the value of play integration throughout the grades, strategies for implementation, and evidence of change in engagement, and academic gains in reading programs that integrate play-based methodologies.

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Questions for Teachers

1. What is the pedagogy of play, and how can these methods (in POP) support teaching of reading?
2. How can teachers differentiate using play-based methods? Furthermore, which types of play are flexible enough for students with varied skill sets and abilities?
3. How can teachers balance using low-tech and high-tech approaches to teaching reading?