

# Play: A secondary concern?

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## KEY POINTS

- Play promotes curiosity and personalised learning, but requires teachers to hand over power to students.
- The current assessment model is an uneasy fit for play-based learning, but play also prompts a reconsideration of what is valued in secondary-school assessment.
- Getting the hands involved in the learning through students constructing “things” supports the development of abstract thinking.
- Trusting students empowers them.

Play is very “on trend” in the primary sector, but is it a suitable pedagogy for secondary students? Based on research into play-based learning in a Year 11 English class, this article provides an overview of play theory, describes a typical play-based lesson in Year 11 English, considers three different approaches to assessment, discusses three broad themes that have emerged through student voice, and provides an illustrative case study of how the freedom inherent in play-based learning allows students to develop personal understandings and challenges our understanding of the role of the teacher.

## Introduction

It wasn't until I had children that I made the connection between play and learning. Slowly, I understood that in their play they mimic their world, developing literacy, numeracy, emotional, physical, relational, and imaginative skills along the way.

These observations led me to some wonderings: At what age do humans stop playing? If playing helps children learn things that school concerns itself with, why is it not used more in school? And is there any reason why learning in secondary school can't be play based? After all, teenagers are full of the urge to play and experiment—socially, intellectually, physically, and emotionally.

This article will first give a short theoretical overview of how I came to believe play has potential as an appropriate learning pedagogy for teenagers. It will then outline my research into the adoption of a play-based pedagogy in secondary-school English, a project I have undertaken as a 2018 recipient of a Dr Vince Ham eFellowship through CORE Education.

## Theoretical overview

Much of my initial thinking was influenced by Dr Peter Gray (2013) and his book *Free to Learn*. His survey of anthropological studies helped me understand the profound role play has as a natural socialisation tool, helping people of all ages learn and practise what they need to be effective members of their community. Gray identifies what he sees as a fundamental aspect of play at its most authentic and powerful—it is free and determined by the individual, but with space for others to contribute. This was a “lightbulb moment” for me. The learning that was taking place in my classrooms was scaffolded and predominantly determined by me, which was far from the natural conditions for learning Gray was describing (e.g., personal, wide ranging, process—not end-product—driven). From

that description I began to understand that there is a difference between what is viewed as good assessment practice in a secondary context and good learning practice, and that I was conflating the two.

Welby Ings' (2017) plea for individuals comfortable operating in a world without maps crystallised that understanding. He argues if we are to do more than pay lip service to creativity we need to get students used to learning in contexts where there is no clear path, where the learning process dictates the outcomes, not the assessment being focused on. The secondary-school experience, where highly scaffolded learning and assessment practice dominate, impede that. His description of a world without a map and critique of highly scaffolded learning strongly echoed Gray's emphasis on freedom and individual determination as indicators of authentic play.

But how can students be freed to learn? Mitch Resnick (2017), the director of the Media Lab @ MIT, believes the best learning contexts are those with “low floors, wide walls and high ceilings”. Those are the conditions, he argues, that enable learners to easily access and move through a learning context in a way that is free and personal, while at the same time stimulating a sense of adventure where exploration, curiosity, trial and error, risk taking, and collaboration are evident (after all, aren't the best adventures those that are gone on with others?) As this is the approach he takes at MIT, I was excited by this—it gave me a clear framework for thinking about play-based learning with learners beyond early primary school.

So, it became obvious to me learning should be an adventure, and all good adventures result in hands getting dirty. Seymour Papert's (1993) work on constructionist theory showed me that abstract, academic knowledge can be built with concrete “things” constructed by our hands. Thinking through the hands, in other words. Another lightbulb—the ideas and meanings we deal with in English can be

## PLAY

physically constructed! This was problematic, however. It is easy to think, “Great, break out the LEGO!” in response to that realisation. But I needed a framework to help me make sense of what I would be seeing if I wanted to recognise the learning within the constructions.

Piaget, (Shaffer & Kipp, 2002) and his stages of cognitive development, gave me that framework. By realising I would be dealing with students ranging from the concrete to formal operating stages I was able to get my head around what the play might look like, how I could start to cater for it and how I could go about recognising, describing, and extending the learning.

As part of my research into play, I kept wondering whether it had been used in a secondary context before. The only reference I found was to Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts, USA (Gray, 2013). This school’s model is predicated on the notion of freedom as a vehicle to facilitate the development of creativity, curiosity, autonomy, and collaboration. The school has students from all age groups, with all students able to determine what, how, with whom, for how long. The teachers work with and from the choices of the students. It is an intriguing model, albeit small scale. Still, for me it served as a kind of exemplar in that it was evidence of the ability for teenagers to learn when given the freedom to play with their own areas of interest.

And in essence, after my background reading and small-scale attempts at adopting this pedagogy in 2017, that is the point I came to: play as a pedagogy is the handing of power over to students to freely determine what they learn. From that, I saw my role as twofold, to: a) create an environment where student interest and curiosity was stimulated in a learning focused way; and b) respond to their decisions without judgement but with a learning focus. A guide for my thinking and decision making became the image of a playground, and the role of children and adults within it.

### The eFellowship Research Project

The research project has been focused on my Year 11 English class, guided by the question “What happens to students and their teacher when play-based pedagogy is used in a secondary school?” I have employed three data-gathering methods to evaluate the impact: a diary for me to record my thinking, observations, and feelings; talanoa methodology conversations (Vaiotei, 2006) as a way to access the voice of student experience in as honest a way as possible; and, student learning journals to document and identify learning.

I was required to go through a detailed ethics process as part of this project, and that meant I had to give

#### A typical lesson

We begin together, to talk and I share a reading (poetry, short story, extended text extract). After the reading, students are freed. There is a range of provocations in the room that are designed to link to the learning focus for the unit. The initial time together and the provocations are an opportunity for me to draw on my subject expertise, respond to student choices, and shape the self-directed play—it is how the low floors, wide walls and high ceilings are created. The free engagement with the provocations is where the personalisation of learning occurs.

From that point I use the “observe, guide, extend, evaluate” framework (McDonald, 2018) to determine my actions. I have conceptualised that as “What am I seeing in the play? What knowledge do I have that can lift the learning that is happening in the play? What do I now notice? Where to next?” Examples of that are:

- Observing a learning need and providing small-group direct instruction as a provocation option.
- Noticing the addition of something (an idea, another physical thing, a text, a short comment or question, an offering of knowledge, etc.) will extend and lift the quality of the play being engaged with.
- Providing guidance to a student who is lost.
- Evaluating the learning a student has done to work out what next.

My role is more active than in the past, and I have been forced to deepen my curriculum knowledge to effectively recognise, guide, extend, and evaluate the learning.



FIGURE 1. A TYPICAL ENGLISH LESSON USING PLAY-BASED PEDAGOGY

significant thought to what exactly I was seeking ethical approval for. I decided it was for the data-collection aspects of the project. As a teacher I have a right to make pedagogical decisions. Every teacher makes that decision every day, even if it is to teach as they always have. For me, it was the data and how it was used that were going to be the publicly visible aspects of the project, and I felt the students had a right to say how much of that exposure they wanted. So, the ethics forms allowed them to opt in to the various methods of data collection, or none at all. Their participation in the learning was not affected by their decision.

In Figure 1, I describe a typical English lesson using play-based pedagogy.

## Assessment

I have found assessment problematic. In essence, it has got in the way, and I have yet to find a satisfactory way of integrating it. Here are the range of approaches I have tried.

### Stopping the learning to assess

This is the business-as-usual approach, and we did this in term 1 for an internal assessment achievement standard and a derived grade essay assessment. This worked well as it was familiar for the students and, because they did very well in both assessments, gave them concrete evidence that the play pedagogy had merit. However, the internal assessment did not link strongly to the learning many students were engaging in and the time spent stopping was a significant interruption of the playful learning—some had reached the natural end of something; many hadn't and had to stop.

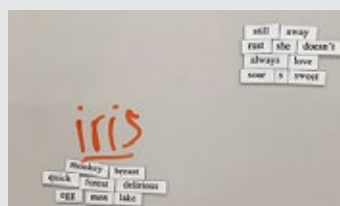
### Using learning stories

I experimented using these to collect and recognise evidence of learning that could be linked to achievement standards. This approach drew inspiration from the learning stories found in the early childhood education (ECE) sector, and has potential. However, it requires a significant time investment and a deep achievement-standard knowledge, and in the business of daily school tasks became something I could only manage to do effectively in “quiet” times. That said, as an assessment method, I feel this approach fits play-based learning really well. It made me be very deliberate in my thinking about what I was seeing, opened up another channel of communication with the students, and allowed them to see in a very precise way their own learning steps. Learning stories made me notice the front end of the curriculum in a way I hadn't before, giving me an authentic way to acknowledge students exhibiting



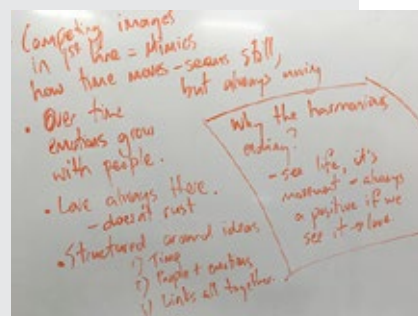
Yesterday I issued a challenge to the class for anyone to write a better poem than the one I did. Magnetic poetry was the tool.

Today you and [redacted] took up the challenge. At first you both played with the various words and options they gave. This was great fun for you both, and within a short amount of time you worked up a range of poem options, using a range of different approaches: throw magnets at the board, randomly grabbing words, supplementing magnetic words with your own one. And then you split, working on a poem each.



[redacted]'s was definitely more 'fun' in

nature, but I liked the crunching of images in yours. I asked you to explain it, and got a faltering response. Then I changed the context, handing you a whiteboard pen “microphone” and asking you to image yourself as a serious poet on a panel at a literary festival. You joined the fantasy willingly. Your poem is packed full of deep meaning, according to poet [redacted]'s response to the audience's questions. And your responses were fluent too. The audience was impressed with your perception. You elaborated with ease.



Most impressive was your response to a question about structure— why is it all scrunched. You looked again and quickly started to play with the layout, settling on this.

[redacted], this work shows me you are able to work quite comfortably with ideas at Level 7 of the curriculum, the indicators for which are that a student:

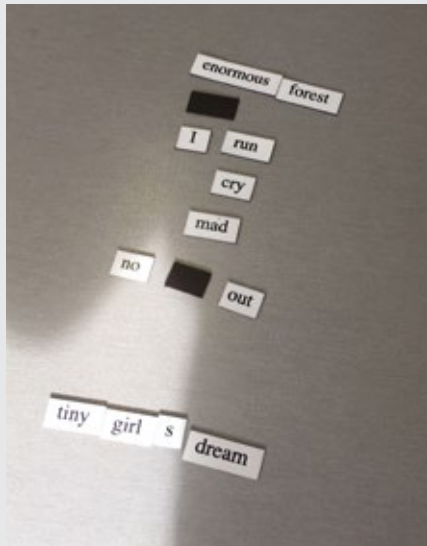
- develops, communicates, and sustains increasingly sophisticated ideas, information, and understandings
- creates coherent, planned whole texts by adding details to ideas or making links to other ideas and details.



Not content with discovering one new literary technique (the false reveal—found in *The Book Thief*. Boy, that was an interesting discussion you had with [REDACTED], particularly when you got on to how it works on 2 levels: both the narrator lying to himself and how the reveal works on us as readers), you pushed on to the poetic form.

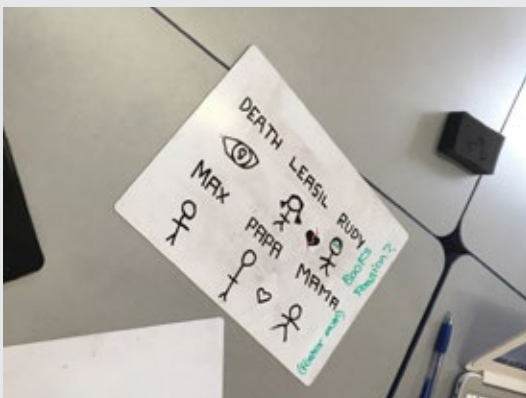
I'm not sure what this technique is called, but I do like how you said it was about the reader being prompted to fill in the gaps. It works, I reckon. I see we can fill it with nothing, or the logical, predictable next piece, or play about with nonsensical words.

I really like how your inventiveness is coming to the fore now, and those strong visual skills you have are transferring into the written word.



You and [REDACTED] are really pushing each other. This visual you were using to help you unpack the symbolic nature of books in *The Book Thief*. You were trying to understand relationships and the place books had in them. Your big question—Why are they stolen?

I don't think you've solved it yet, but I enjoyed listening in on some of the conversation.



LEARNING STORY 2

those “soft” skills. I was often able to make achievement-standard links, but there would be challenges from a moderation standpoint as many of these links were unconventional presentations of the skill which the standard assessed.

### Allowing students to link the learning to achievement standards

This has become the “compromise position”. Students are handing in work for assessment, with the idea being it is work that has been developed organically from provocations and exploration. This has allowed the assessment to accurately reflect the learning which students have freely engaged in, and as a result there is a wide range of achievement standards being submitted. For some though, the temptation to “do” the standard has been too strong to resist, and this is where my unease with this approach resides.

Of the three approaches, I feel learning stories connect most strongly with play as a pedagogy, and would like to explore their potential in a more deliberate way. They support assessment for learning by forcing the teacher to observe and describe the learning and capabilities of the students in a non-judgemental way. Learning stories made me more intentional in what I was observing, which helped me understand in a deeper way what provocations could extend the learning. In this way, learning stories support the freedom, personal curiosity, and wide-ranging nature of learning that play as a pedagogy has. This is assessment as a developing narrative where teacher and student can see and validate progress, which is a significantly different model to how NCEA is conceived where assessment is seen as an end point where capability is measured and judged. If as a sector we are uneasy with what NCEA is “doing” to our students, perhaps learning stories are a way in which we can reframe the assessment model, and even what we value in assessment, in secondary schools.

### Case study

During term 2 we had a written-word focus, where the learning was oriented around reading and writing. Essentially, students were playing with language, in terms of comprehension and expression. As the term progressed, a student got sidetracked by labyrinths, sparked by the fact some characters in a novel she read were trapped by the suffering they were experiencing—a labyrinth of suffering, this student called it. She understood the epiphany the characters have at the end—forgiveness is the way out of suffering—but she didn't understand why it was the way out.

## Talanoa conversations: What the students are saying

Talanoa methodology has been used by anthropologists in the Pacific as a way to minimise the risk of subjects saying what they want the researcher to hear (Vaiotele, 2006). By capturing conversational data from everyday, normal, natural “events” it is hoped a more honest story will emerge. I have attempted to recreate this methodology in a small way, capturing the conversations when small groups of students who had opted into that data-collection method and myself have had lunch together and played Scrabble. The following are three broad themes that I have identified in the talanoa data. The data that has emerged through this methodology is what has forced me to think most critically about my practice.

### “If we choose what we want to do we want to do it”— Freedom allows for personalised learning.

There is a strong theme emerging in the data about the power of freedom when it comes to student learning. Students speak of liking being able to “sidetrack” and “learn what we’re actually interested in”. They believe this has had positive impact on their learning, prompting deeper thought and the confidence to develop their own understandings:

You’re not told what to do so you have to think. (*Student*)

We come up with our own concepts now ... our own thinking. (*Student*)

Also, students have noted the freedom this approach has given them to collaborate:

You get to discuss ... until you get an idea you want to go deeper with. (*Student*)

This natural collaboration has forced me to notice more learning behaviours associated with the front end of the curriculum, and also realise the power of dialogue to deepen understanding.

We also see here that freedom is not resulting in a retreat from learning, but instead a highly personal engagement in learning being exhibited through the urge to think about and explore ideas. This mirrors Gray’s (2013) assertion that play provides space for people to practice what they need to be effective members of their community. This is interesting, and suggests that the more space I can give students to make sense of ideas on their own terms the more engaged they will be with them because they will reflect their world in a meaningful way:

I have to see it and do it to remember and understand it. (*Student*)

### The active construction of “things” facilitates learning.

Many of the provocations have been physical, requiring the use of hands—Lego, playdough, puppets, story “building blocks”, magnetic poetry and so forth—which means things have been built. Of course, building things takes time, so I removed whole-class direct instruction. I was pleased I did. The talanoa data is suggesting students have a clear preference for being active in their learning:

When we took notes I just copied and never really read, now the notes are in my brain. (*Student*)

I don’t really listen ... I can’t imagine it for myself ... doing it works ... it’s good to chose to be able to do that. (*Student*)

Students are saying having the freedom to choose what they construct is powerful:

At one point in the term I did a claymation thing and then I did a poem over it, because why not. And I actually found from just doing that I kind of understood it more without intending to. (*Student*)

The learning, according to the students, is effective because they are consistently creating personal understandings from things they can physically see. Papert (1993) argues that the construction of things “in the head” is supported by the construction of things “in the world”. The student comments suggest this true. With secondary schooling becoming more and more concerned with the abstract (the “in the head” stuff), I wonder what we’re missing?

I feel like this approach is going to teach us how to learn on our own. (*Student*)

### Trusting students empowers them.

This is another strong theme emerging, and one I have been surprised by. It seems that me stepping aside has enabled the students to take ownership of their learning, navigating their own path. They have said the absence of the “next instruction” has increased their initiative because they know they can “keep going at your own pace” and “not have to wait.” They enjoy the trust inherent in play as a pedagogy because it makes the learning relevant and empowering:

In English I’m actually learning because I’m choosing what I learn. (*Student*)

I’ve been told a lot that I’m not independent ... it has given me the confidence to know that I actually can do something for myself ... and not just in English. (*Student*)

These comments have provided a point of critical reflection for me. I have realised that my position as the “director of learning” in the classroom actually means students will not show initiative, but instead they will defer to me. If I want students to show initiative and take ownership I have to step aside and be guided by them. This is one way in which I can create Ings’ (2017) “world without a map” as each student’s learning journey will be different. When I validate those individual paths, it shows their individual learning journey is valuable.



FIGURE 2. TALANOA CONVERSATIONS

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She decided to visualise this, starting with constructing labyrinths out of playdough, then drawing them and sharing them with other students.

The labyrinth was just like a game almost but it kinda showed when T\_\_\_ couldn't get out it was because she was trying to force her way out, I could see it in her eyes ...

Then it started to make sense to me ... you can't go through the wall, you have to turn around and forgive your mistakes. I got that idea from the labyrinth. (Student)

This took a week. To my teacher eyes it looked like a series of puzzles with no apparent purpose that were "distracting" other students. But I left her to it, resisting the urge to say, "Look, it's been X days now, don't you think it's time to move on?" because, as I kept having to remind myself, for it to truly be play students must be free to choose when, what, and how, and have the power to walk away when they are done. Not when I think they should be.

Later, I asked her about my decision to leave her alone. She said, "The enjoyment gets taken out when someone tells you what to do, that you're not doing it right ... doing it in my own time was really nice." And she wouldn't have gone back to it because "going back to ideas is harder ... it's almost lost ... when we get to stick with what we want to do we get more out of it." As

our conversation drew to a close she said to me, "now the notes are in my brain". Notes I hadn't written and shared and talked to. Notes she had built herself by getting her hands dirty as she went on her labyrinth adventure.

If we consider the themes above, it is clear this student has, through the freedom play has given her, developed deep understandings about a key idea in the novel she read. Those understandings reflect a genuine engagement with the text which is personal and perceptive. Furthermore, they were developed through the construction of something "in the world" which supported the ideas that were unresolved in her inner world; her understanding became abstract because she had the ability to construct something concrete and personally meaningful. And, because I left her to pursue it, I created space for her to sustain the motivation to explore the problem because it remained an enjoyable one to solve.

## Conclusion

I have been enthused by what I have found through this project. Although there are still significant aspects of my practice that need to evolve from it, and assessment practice remains an issue, it has shown me the positive impact that trusting students and emphasising learning over assessment has on engagement, enjoyment, and

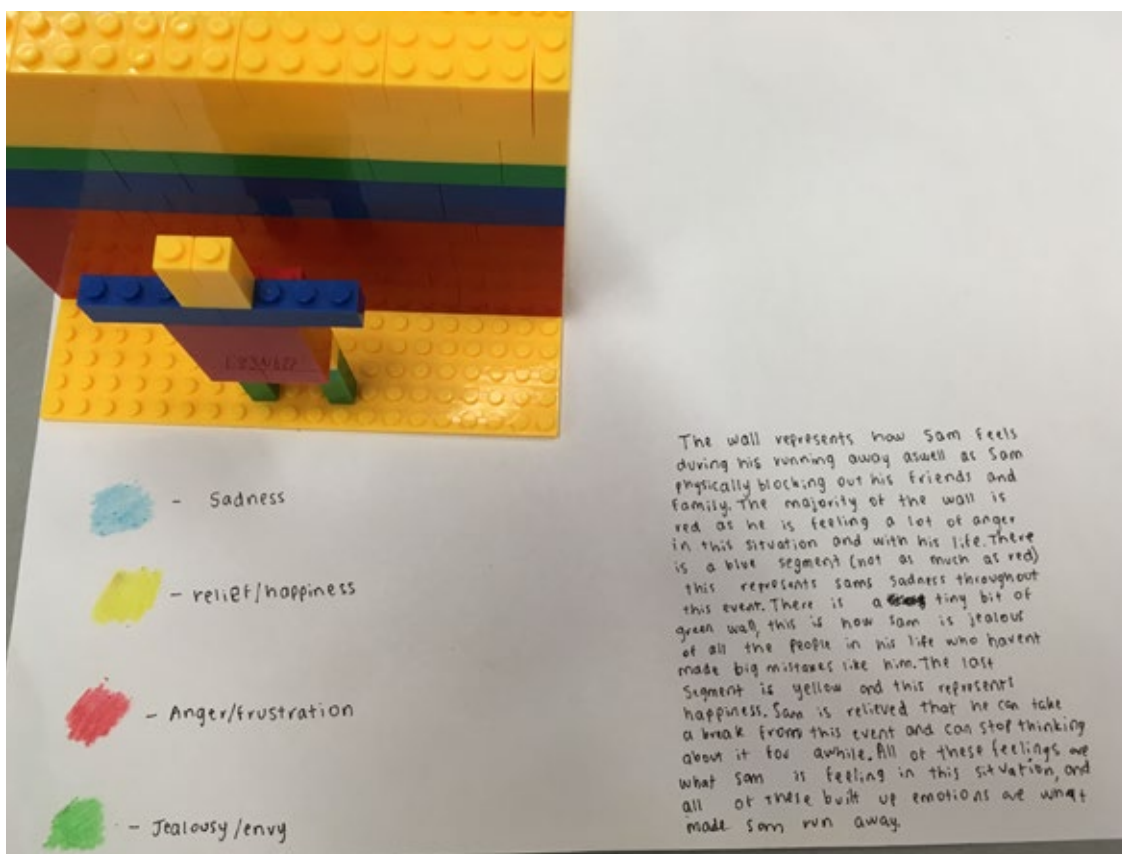


FIGURE 3. THE WALL

subject-specific development. Play-based learning has allowed me to create the context for those themes to surface. The use of play-based learning in secondary school also has the potential to force a rethink about what we value in and as assessment.

From a professional practice perspective, play-based learning has led to me having more meaningful time with each student, and as a result I have understood the students in ways I haven't before. The provocations I have set up, the deliberate noticing I have had to do to be effective as a teacher, and the increased opportunities to work alongside students in response to their individual choices and needs are the major contributors to this. Alongside this, a big realisation has been the need for secondary school to revalue the concrete and the place of the hands as a crucial part of the learning process. I think it is absolutely true we think through the hands. There is nothing quite like play to get the hands naturally involved.

But it is the voice of the students which has been most powerful for me. They have showed me, both in action and in words, that teenagers are more motivated and capable than I have previously given them credit for. This realisation has had a significant impact on my thinking about learning and my role in supporting it.

Should play be a secondary concern? The students in this study have overwhelmingly said yes. They love getting their hands dirty. They love being freed to learn. They want more.

## Acknowledgements

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