

The Power of Play
Marcia L. Nell, PhD
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The invitation to present at this esteemed conference was both a privilege and a challenge. As a play scholar, member of The Association of the Study of Play (TASP) and as the President of TASP, I have come to understand that play is an enigma. The more I try to study and understand play through my own lens, I discover more questions than answers. My dissertation committee chair said that is the sign of a “good research” – “good research” should uncover more questions than answers! Our revered play scholar, Brian Sutton-Smith, described play as being “ambiguous” while others expound on play’s paradoxical qualities (Gruneau 1980; Loy 1982; Handelman 1992; Kline 1995, as cited in Henricks, 2015).

Play as Paradox

Levy (1978, p. 1) depicts the act of play as one that the player must accept the paradox of the “essential and the inconsequential” facts associated with play. Huizinga (1955, p. 5) speaks to play’s paradoxical components of serious and nonserious. When considering play at the surface level, “play is the direct opposite of seriousness...As soon as we proceed from “play is non-seriousness” to “play is not serious”, the contrast leaves us in the lurch – for some play is very serious indeed.” Gregory Bateson in 1972 describes the paradox of the player who is well aware of the difference of the pretense and reality and yet works diligently to confuse that distinction by making their pretenses real (Henricks, 2015, p. 19). Caillois (2001) speaks to play’s rules and its improvisational aspect. While Henricks (2010) explains the paradox of order and disorder associated in the play experience. (Henricks, 2015, p. 19)

A New Framework to Understand Play

“There is much value in recognizing the spectrum of play’s manifestations and meanings. By accommodating itself to this variety the academic study of play is thickened and made vigorous...In that regard, play scholars and advocates offer accounts of play that correspond to their distinctive circumstances and interests.”(Henricks, 2015, p. 20). Henricks values the wider more expansive view that accommodates the massive variety of play scholarship, which he states is rooted in the personal perspective of the researcher. Therefore, the scholarly study of play is rooted in the different perspective found in human beings.

Play scholars rigorously study play and have differentiated play from other types of human and other species behavior. The table below shares the common components of play from several leading play scholars.

Henricks creates a framework in which play scholarship from the various disciplines and fields of study can be compared for similarities and for the differences.

“Understanding play means understanding the intersection of these different contributions...most theories tend to describe well certain aspects of play but neglect or treat poorly other matters that rival approaches emphasize”(Henricks, 2015, p. 14-15).

Ways of Thinking About Play

Lens: Play as	Description	Disciplines	Purpose
Action	Distinctive pattern of consciously guided behavior; players are <i>doers</i> , not <i>watchers</i> ; personal assertion, evaluation, & resolution	Psychologists, educators, recreation scholars	Construct, support, & revise
Interaction	A pattern of engagement; players <i>act</i> but also <i>react</i> ; players play with or at something/someone	Sociology, social anthropology, education, recreation, and social psychology	Communicate
Activity	A form <i>of</i> and <i>for</i> human conduct; shared understanding of playmates, locale, duration, behaviors, consequences and emotions	Anthropology, folklore, literature, and structured forms of sociology	Tie together the past, present, and future tenses of behavior
Disposition	Play behaviors feature motivations different from other behaviors; curiosity and enthusiasm; high spirited or energy to burn	Psychology, Sociology, Education	Preparation for action; eagerness to play and keeps player engaged
Experience	Awareness and satisfaction while playing; reward for what's happening now and a motivation for anticipated satisfaction; engagement between 2 versions of self	Psychology, Education, Recreation	Fun, enjoyment, and feeling satisfied
Context	Set of conditions or arrangements that encourage play behaviors; minimal adult intervention, free choice, familiarity of people/objects, & absence of stress; external challenges match skill level	Psychology, Education Recreation	Makes play easier; shapes forms of play

(Henricks, 2015, p. 23-34)

Rhetorics of Play

Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) created a framework that has been used extensively for play scholars and others in creating an understanding of the various theories associated with the study of play. According to Sutton-Smith, “the rhetorics of play express the way play is placed in context within broader value systems, which are assumed by the theorists of play rather than studied directly by them” (1997, p. 8). The rhetoric of play as progress is associated with children’s play, development is spurred forward through play, and is a strong influence in Western culture. The rhetoric of play as self is linked to the individual,

with desirable effects such as fun, relaxation, escape, and with intrinsic or aesthetic satisfaction with the play act itself. The rhetoric of play as imaginary is applied to improvisation in literature, with high regard for flexibility, creativity and innovation. The rhetoric of play as power is associated with sports and contests. In this rhetoric play represents conflict and a way to establish status of those who are in charge of the play. The rhetoric of play as identity is usually associated with traditional community celebrations and festivals. The rhetoric of play as fate considers the games of chance and gambling. This rhetoric is one of the oldest and its distinguishing feature is free choice. The final rhetoric looks at play as frivolity, which is applied to the deeds of the imprudent or the indolent.

The Seven Rhetorics of Play

Rhetoric	Function	Form	Discipline
Progress	Adaptation, growth, socialization	Play, games	Biology, psychology, education
Self	Peak experience	Leisure, solitary, extreme games	Psychiatry
Imaginary	Creativity, flexibility	Fantasy, tropes	Art and literature
Power	Status, victory	Skill, strategy, deep play	Sociology, history
Identity	Communitas, cooperation	Festivals, parades, parties, new games	Anthropology, folklore
Fate	Magic, luck	Chance	Math
Frivolity	Inversion, playfulness	Nonsense	Pop culture

(Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 215)

Rhetoric of Play as Progress: Approaches to Learning through Play

Using Sutton-Smith's rhetoric of play as progress lens, children's development and growth is spurred forward through participation in play experiences. In the state of Pennsylvania in the US, early learning standards support this perspective as is evidenced in the standard area labeled Approaches to Learning Through Play Standards. In this standard area there are four main strands, which include constructing and gathering knowledge, organizing and understanding knowledge, applying knowledge, and taking this new learning beyond the present moment. When we consider how children construct and gather information, three standards fall under that strand. First, children must have a sense of curiosity, a sense of wonderment. Then the child must act upon that curiosity with initiative to find answers to their questions. The child must take reasonable risks in pursuing their quest for answers, and reasonable is the key word. According to Parten (1932), social play has different levels, such as unoccupied, solitary, onlooker, parallel, associative, and cooperative play, so it is not only important to understand that a child gathers information through play but also which types of play are the best source for the child. Although Parten's original work indicated a hierarchical perspective to the different stages, it is not necessarily true that solitary play is a lesser form of play indicating the child is not mature enough to engage in cooperative play. There is that tendency to "expect" all children to play together, but there are specific reasons why some children prefer solitary

play. For example, a child that is an introvert may find more success in working by themselves rather than in a group. Or in the work of Howard Gardner (1983) and his theory of Multiple Intelligences, the area described as Intrapersonal would also support the idea that some children prefer the solitary play to other more social forms of play.

Moving beyond the initial gathering of information the standards then outline how a child organizes and comes to understand the new knowledge. This is accomplished through engagement and attention, task analysis, persistence, patterning and memory. Each of these standards describe mental processes that are vital not only for the child but as life long skills. So, the development of these mental processes through play as a young child provides the future adult with a foundation for being a successful adult (Gallinsky 2010; Heckman 2015). Being able to stay focused, to break down a task into its smaller components, to persist when a task becomes difficult are all processes that adults must be able to do to be successful in their jobs and work places. To recognize patterns and to extend patterns provides the child with the skill to anticipate what will happen next based on previous information, this is a vital skill for learning to comprehend in reading but also in personal relationships and in the work place. Working memory, helping a child build their capacity to understand how their brain stores information and then how to retrieve that same information when it is needed later, is a vital life skill.

As the standards indicate, the child must apply their knowledge using creativity, expressing their knowledge, and inventing with that knowledge. Finally, the child must make connections; show resiliency and use problem solving skills with this new knowledge. Each of these strands within the Approaches to Learning are developed, practiced, and internalized through play experiences. A child learns content specific information while playing, but the life skills such as those described in the Approaches to Learning through Play standards are foundational and vital throughout the child's life span. When we look at these standards with a different lens, we notice that these same skills outlined in the standards align with what other researchers describe as executive function (EF) skills.

Rhetoric of Play as Progress: Cognitive Development and Executive Function Skills

EF skills are comprised of working memory, to hold information and recall it when needed; cognitive flexibility, the ability to change and adjust mental effort; inhibitory control, the ability to resist distractions; and self regulation, the ability to delay gratification (Center on the Developing Child, 2011). EF skills enable the child to plan, to focus attention, to remember instructions, and to handle multiple tasks successfully. EF skills are located primarily in the prefrontal cortex and rapid growth occurs in this area of the brain from birth through age 7 but also beyond. Neuroscience has provided hard empirical evidence to support what earlier researchers documented and recognized through carefully planned observational studies (Vygotsky 1978, Piaget 1962). So, play provides a context or experience in which cognitive processes are practiced and internalized but play also serves a purpose on its own merits.

According to Sivi and Panksepp, 2011, "play behavior is a fundamental and intrinsic neurobehavioral process in the mammalian brain" (p. 1821). Based on their research studies mapping the neurological pathways or circuits of the play urge in rats, these researchers suggest that the "increased insight into the neurological mechanisms of play can inform our understanding of normal and abnormal childhood development" (p. 182).

Their work also recognizes that play is a behavior observed in all mammals as well as the work from Burghart (2005) that has documented play behaviors in reptiles. With the widespread prevalence of play behaviors in many animal species, this suggests that play behavior evolved early in the evolutionary terms, and the play impulse has been isolated to the brain stem. Thus, as Brown (2009) asserts, the play urge has evolved into a biological drive such as eating, drinking, sex, and play. There is an inherent urge to play, as strong an urge as the other biologically based survival skills. According to Brown and Vaughn, 2009, play is “one of the most advanced methods nature has invented to allow a complex brain to create itself” (p. 40).

Rhetoric of Play as Progress: Social, Emotional, Physical and Language Development

Not only does play aid in the development of cognitive skills, it also plays a huge role in the development of social and emotional skills. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) there are five core competencies for social and emotional learning, which include self awareness, self management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making skills. Since play has an intrinsically motivating quality along with a desire for the player to continue in the play, a child develops these skills through play. A child becomes aware of who they are as an individual, as a part of a community and regulate their own behavior in order for the play to continue. A child develops empathy and understanding for others as they participate in play experiences with other children. A child builds relationships and makes wiser decisions based on their play experiences. Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent education and former governor of West Virginia states, “Too often, Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is episodic. Some students finish high schools. Some don’t. When you look back in the rearview mirror, you can almost always see SEL as a determining factor of their success.”

Play has also been associated with physical development. In this area of development there is gross and fine motor skills and spatial awareness skills that develop through play experiences. Active outdoor play can certainly impact and influence a child’s gross motor skills as well as fine motor skill development in other types of play experiences with small objects as the play object. Spatial awareness is defined as organized knowledge of objects in relation to oneself in that given space, and has become a focus of many occupational therapists working with children. Play helps children develop this spatial awareness through paying close attention to details of the objects being played with and by building awareness of the surroundings of the play context.

Language development in young children can be influenced tremendously through play experiences. The social interaction that occurs during play provides a safe context for children to experiment with verbal and nonverbal communication skills. Emergent literacy skills can be developed which in turn create an intrinsic need for literacy. The use of symbolism during play builds the child’s capacity for thinking in symbolic ways and thus prepares the brain for the symbolic thinking necessary to read and write using symbols (Vygotsky 1978). According to Genishi and Dyson (2009) fantasy play is depend on language to sustain the play over time.

The Power of Play:

We've discussed the various issues associated with defining play, taking a broader scope when interpreting and describing play experiences, and we've examined two types of frameworks that help to organize the various perspectives of play scholarship. Through the rhetoric of play as progress we've outlined how play impacts cognitive, executive function skills, social, emotional, physical, and language development. This vast knowledge base on play validates the power that is released during play. We play because we can, we play because we must-it is a biological drive to seek pleasure, positive affect and identify who we are in this world.

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