

PLAY IN THE EARLY ELEMENTARY ART ROOM: CREATIVE ACTIVITIES FOR  
PLAYFUL LEARNING

By

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A CAPSTONE PROJECT PRESENTED TO THE COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
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ABSTRACT OF CAPSTONE PROJECT PRESENTED TO THE COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS  
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Committee Member: Craig Roland  
Major: Art Education

**Abstract**

This capstone project addresses the need for play in the classroom environment. Using games and playful learning activities can benefit a student's social skills, motivation, and encourages a student-centered approach to learning. Throughout this project I researched playful activities and educational games that can be used successfully in a first grade classroom. This paper also reviews literature about play, the use of games in the classroom, different types of games available, art games specifically, game development, and the benefits of games including cognitive development, social development, strategic planning, and enhancing student motivation. I also investigated educational games by surveying other educators to see if they use educational games, as well as researched resources available online. I compiled these resources in an online Scoop.it archive, [www.scoop.it/t/educational-games-used-to-enhance-instructional-delivery](http://www.scoop.it/t/educational-games-used-to-enhance-instructional-delivery). Using an action research approach, I introduced my students to playful learning experiences and recorded the successfulness of each activity. I created an online resource that expands on my findings and catalogs several playful learning activities within these categories:

Playing with Materials, Role-Playing Activities, and Educational Games. My website can be found at [www.playfullearningthroughart.weebly.com](http://www.playfullearningthroughart.weebly.com).

My capstone paper describes my research process, findings, and recommendations. First I discuss the need for a different approach to learning in the art room. Then in my literature review I describe the benefits of using games. Finally I share my findings from my surveys and through classroom observations. My recommendations include implementing the playful learning activities and educational games found on my website in the classroom environment to enhance student learning and motivation. I conclude this capstone paper with final insights about the great potential of playful learning in the classroom environment.

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## **Are You Game?**

As I walk past the doorways of fellow teachers within my school, I notice that almost all of the students are routinely filling out worksheets or blankly gazing at the board, listening to an engaging discussion about animal ecosystems. What if there was a way to engage students in the learning process and still cover pertinent information? Or for students to learn new information in a fun and exciting way that could include self-discovery learning without the overbearing assistance from the teacher? This capstone research project looks at ways of enhancing instructional delivery with the use of educational games and playful learning activities in my first grade art room. After researching different types of educational games and playful learning activities, I developed my own playful learning activities, implemented them in my first grade classroom and documented what happened. I also created a website to share my research, [www.playfullearningthroughart.weebly.com](http://www.playfullearningthroughart.weebly.com). My website is a resource compiling the most successful learning activities and educational games that will enhance student learning and motivation. In this capstone research paper I share my research on the need for change in the traditional classroom environment, the goals and significance of my study, a literature review focusing on play and educational games, methodologies of my action research, and my findings, insights and recommendations from the project.

### **Statement of the Problem, Rationale, and Goals of the Study**

I teach Kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade at a charter school in Michigan. I have found through my own professional teaching experiences that students seem less and less motivated to learn through traditional direct instructional methods. I have made a personal effort to create fun and innovative lessons to enhance student learning and motivation. However, my students and I do not always share the same definition of fun. Although my lessons appeared fun, they often started off in a very traditional way that included looking at different famous artworks that

coincided with the lesson. That made me wonder, is there a way to get students excited about looking at, discussing, and creating art while maintaining a fun, engaging, and playful classroom atmosphere? The research I conducted explored the use of educational games and playful learning activities to enhance student motivation and overall excitement in the art room.

I have based this capstone research project on my belief that using games and playful activities to deliver content will enrich student learning, engagement, and motivation. As noted by Cardinale and Anderson (1979), there's just something unexpected and fun when we make learning playful. "A game is different from other types of learning situations such as the more traditional lessons or art activities because there is in every game the chance element, or drama of the unknown" (Cardinale & Anderson, 1979, p. 17). The goals for my research included researching educational art games and playful activities to enhance student learning and motivation. Using playful learning activities and games as an educational tool is not uncommon and there are numerous resources about play in the classroom environment. I would like to add to these resources and contribute to the argument for playful learning.

I currently use games to review information and have found that the repetition of facts and art vocabulary allows students to feel confident when using said vocabulary in the classroom. My research builds upon and extends these kinds of efforts. Throughout this research project, I investigated different educational resources on playful activities. I compiled my findings on an online archive that can be found at [www.scoop.it/t/educational-games-used-to-enhance-instructional-delivery](http://www.scoop.it/t/educational-games-used-to-enhance-instructional-delivery). I also surveyed fellow teachers to ascertain if they use educational games in their classrooms. Based on these sources, I then implemented a variety of games and playful learning activities in my first grade art classroom to see how they worked and

how students responded. This paper and my website share some of my findings and recommendations based on my examination of what happened in my classroom.

My website is also a resource: [www.playfullearningthroughart.weebly.com/](http://www.playfullearningthroughart.weebly.com/). This resource houses three primary areas of interest relating to play in the classroom: Playing with Materials, Role-playing Activities, and Educational Games. Not only does this web resource give several examples of playful activities to incorporate in the classroom or in the home setting, it also includes my professional insights about how to implement these activities, variations on how they can be played, and the importance and relevance of each activity. The purpose of creating this resource is to provide teachers and parents with instructional materials they might use to incorporate playful learning activities and educational games in their classroom to enhance instructional delivery, motivate students to learn, and to encourage students to create their own knowledge through play.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions below guided my exploration of playful learning activities and educational games to enhance curriculum and instruction in my first grade art room. *How can educational games be used in the classroom to enhance playful learning? What types of educational art games are currently available or being used? How can play be applied to a classroom setting successfully? and What are the benefits to using games in the classroom to enhance playful learning?*

### **Terms and Definitions**

*Games.* Games are rule-oriented activities that include objectives, outcomes, and an element of fun and competition. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) define games as a “system in

which players engage in artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome” (p. 80).

*Educational Game.* An educational game is a game that has educational worth or value. Educational games can include card games, memory games, board games, and/or digital games. Cardinale and Anderson (1979) note how an art game differs from other games in that “it has art activity or art concepts at its core” (p. 17). For the purpose of this study, I will be focusing on card, memory, and/or board games; not digital games.

*Game Strategy.* Using learned skill and technique to achieve a specific goal or change the output of a game is known as a gaming strategy. Strategy can be learned and acquired through active participation in the game (Crowley & Siegler, 1999).

*Simulation vs. Non-Simulation Games.* Susi (1988) divides games into two different categories: simulation and non-simulation games. He describes simulation games to be realistic in nature. Role-playing games would be considered a type of simulation game (Venable, 2001). Susi (1988) describes non-simulation games as having “players solve problems or answer questions on a specific subject” (p. 18).

*Infinite vs. Finite Games.* According to Carse (1986), “there are at least two kinds of games. . . A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play” (p. 3). Finite games have a defined beginning and end. They also usually result in having a winner of the game. Hicks (2004), writes that infinite games develop organically, “they aren’t repetitions of parts already scripted in the past, but instead, open out into an unknown and as yet unscripted future” (p. 290).

*Play.* Play is typically thought of as non-utilitarian activity that involves exploration, novelty, and learning. Szekely (1991) writes about Froebel’s approach to play as being described

as “children develop(ing) knowledge by being encouraged to explore, to express themselves, and to learn by doing” (p. 2). Consequently, Szekely (1991) felt very similarly about play. Play should be fun, open-ended, and organic in nature.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review focuses on games and play in the classroom. For years games were viewed as an educational novelty, but games have come a long way and have been found in many instances to enhance student learning, encourage social development, as well as be a motivational tool. According to Susi (1988), “Games...are especially useful in adding variety to one’s repertoire of instructional approaches and in meeting the needs of students with widely different learning styles” (p. 20). From board games to role-playing games, each offer different ways for students to either learn new information, enhance one’s knowledge, and/or to review previously learned material. Cardinale and Anderson (1979), state that “A game is different from other types of learning situations such as the more traditional lessons or art activities because there is in every game the chance element, or drama of the unknown...At any moment something can happen which is not predicted, and this is what holds’ students’ attention” (p. 17). For all of these reasons teachers are often attracted to the idea of incorporating games in the classroom. The remainder of this literature review will define play, discuss the benefits of educational games, game development, and will provide several examples of art games.

### **Play**

The idea of play in the classroom environment has been around since the late eighteenth-century. In the 1840’s, Froebel was a key player in the development of play as an integral part of the classroom experience (Manning, 2005). He was a man before his time; his thoughts and insights on early childhood education and play have remained relevant in today’s classrooms. According to Froebel (1887/1974):

Play is the highest phase of child development – of human development at this period. Play is the purest, most spiritual activity of man at this stage, and, at the same time, typical of human life as a whole – of the inner hidden natural life in man and all things. It gives, therefore, joy, freedom, contentment, inner and outer rest, peace with the world. It holds the sources of all that is good. (pp. 54–55)

Froebel further developed the idea of play and created “gifts” to encourage children to learn through play and manipulatives (Manning, 2005). Froebel believed that structured/guided play was the most constructive when encouraging a playful learning experience in the classroom (Manning, 2005). Katter (1988) agrees with Froebel on the importance of play but builds on it to include the importance of playing games. She observes that, “learning seems to proceed best when subject matter is introduced in a non- threatening situation, and the fun of the game activity often minimizes the tension that inhibits the processing of information” (p. 47). An authority on play in the classroom, Szekely (1991) on the other hand feels that play should be less structured and occur more organically. The environment, material selection, movement, and performance are all important elements in play; but most importantly play should be fun (Szekely, 1991). Szekely bridges the gap between art creation and play by encouraging the creative process in the classroom through playful learning experiences.

### **Benefits of Educational Games**

The use of educational games in the classroom to enhance student motivation and playful learning in contemporary art education is not a new concept (Oden & Asher, 1977; Crowley & Siegler, 1999; Katter, 1988; Susi, 1988). Katter (1988) writes, “Theoretical and empirical evidence supports the notion that play and games facilitate children’s cognitive development” (p. 46). Games and playful learning also create a social environment that enhances not only art

learning but community and personal growth (DeVries, 1997). Games can teach a wide variety of content and can also be incorporated in the classroom at all levels and ages.

There have been several studies done on the benefits of games (Oden & Asher, 1977: Crowley & Siegler, 1999: Katter, 1988: Susi, 1988). These benefits include cognitive development, social growth, strategic planning, and enhancing student's motivation to learn (Oden & Asher, 1977: Crowley & Siegler, 1999: Katter, 1988: Susi, 1988). Consequently, not all games will produce equal results and some games may be deemed non-educational.

Cognitive development is often the primary goal of using games in the classroom. In educational games, students still need to be learning the content required (Katter, 1988). Peer interaction is important in games as well as in education. DeVries (1997) writes about Piaget's social theory and the importance of peer interactions, "According to Piaget, peer interactions are crucial to a child's construction of social and moral feelings, values, and social and intellectual competence" (p. 4). Piaget knew the importance of child-to-child interactions and used them when developing his social theories. He discovered features that are relevant to social exchanges including: a common frame of reference, shared language and symbols, shared conservation of propositions, and reciprocity of thought among partners (DeVries, 1997). These characteristics are needed to encourage social development and can be implemented with the use of games (DeVries, 1997). According to Oden and Asher (1977):

Social skills. . . were proposed as useful for making a game fun or enjoyable to play with another person: (a) participating in a game or activity, (b) cooperating (e.g. taking turns and sharing materials), (c) communicating (e.g. talking and listening), and (d) validating or supporting (e.g. giving attention or help). (p. 497)

I believe that these kinds of insights about peer interaction and social learning are important in the construction and implementation of educational games in the classroom.

### **Strategic Planning and Motivation**

Games in the classroom are also useful for teaching students about planning and strategy. Crowley and Siegler (1999) explored the development of gaming strategy using tic-tac-toe. Strategy is often a learned observational practice. Students pick up different winning strategies through repetition and “observing the problem-solving of the people around them” (Crowley & Siegler, 1999, p. 304). In their study, using a computer program to generate games and to provide aural reinforcements, students were given the opportunity to play and learn from the computer.

Games are a great way to encourage learning in the classroom environment. In addition to teaching strategy, games often encourage competitiveness and motivation to be successful (to complete the play and even to win). Katter (1988) observes that “games are pleasurable learning experiences which improve student interest in the subject and provide stimulating applications of concepts” (p. 47). A motivation for role-playing games is that, “feelings of realism and relevance are injected into the classroom as students apply their knowledge in real life game situations” (Susi, 1988, p. 20).

### **Game Development**

There are several factors that encourage productive game development. Bain and Newton (2003) described what goes into game design. They had undergraduate students from the University of North Texas create art education games that would later be implemented in the classroom. Not only was the game creating process beneficial to enhancing the knowledge of

college level students, the games were played and analyzed by elementary school children.

Katter (1988) lists several questions that should be considered when planning a game including:

- What is the objective?
- How will the game be played?
- What is the goal?
- Does the game introduce a new concept?
- How can you facilitate transfer of learning?
- Does the game motivate the learner and stimulate interest in the subject matter?
- Are the rules and scoring simple and easy to understand? (Katter, 1988, p. 54)

Susi (1988) has also developed a list of expectations that game development must incorporate. These guidelines include:

1. Determine the purpose and goals of the game.
2. Select the content or situation you intend to simulate.
3. Identify the roles players will take.
4. Identify the resources necessary for play.

Susi's approach is more linear, organized and easier to follow compared to Katter's series of questions.

### **Examples of Art Games**

There are several examples of games discussed in the literature. Although there are not many art games that are commercially produced there are a lot of different hand-made games that can be created and used to enhance art knowledge. The content for art games can include developing "artistic skills, aesthetic values, historical facts, critical inquiry or any other principles and concepts from the disciplines of art" (Katter, 1988, p. 47).

“Artifact” is a game created by Erickson and Katter in 1981. This game has four different versions where students can learn about different aspects of art. Version one encourages students to identify when each work was produced and group pieces accordingly. Version two has students match descriptions with images of the art. Version three uses interpretation to determine information about the art and version four encourages the players to explore how cultural characteristics affected the artwork. This game offers several layers of learning development while using only one set of playing materials. Cardinale (1979) and students at Ohio State University and The University of Arizona designed “The People Game” which can be played with the class or as little as six people. This game uses descriptors to create and design people.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout the literature that I examined I have learned about play, different types of games, the benefits of games, game development, and specific art games. The theories on play have provided me with what play can and should look like in the classroom environment. I find that all of the approaches to play aforementioned encourage the child to construct their own knowledge based on the materials they are given to explore. Szekely (1991) approaches games through child-centered exploration and self-discovery learning. Play should be discovered through the eyes of the child with the assistance of manipulatives. Froebel (1887/1974) also uses manipulatives but in a more controlled setting with pre-determined learning activities and learning goals. Both Katter (1988) and Froebel (1887/1974) encourage a structured approach to playful learning through games and guided instruction. I feel that Froebel’s (1887/1974) and Szekely’s approach to play are different in how play should be implemented but have a common goal; learning should be fun. But how can both theories on play be implemented in a classroom

together? After reviewing literature on games, I find that Katter's (1988) approach to game development is the most beneficial when creating and testing several different types of games in my classroom. Throughout the remainder of this paper, I have contributed to this research by adding my own thoughts on play in the classroom environment; including what I feel are different classifications of play.

### **Methodology**

The goal of my research was to find alternative ways to motivate students in the classroom by using playful learning activities and educational games. I field-tested many of the playful learning activities and games with my first grade students. I also surveyed my colleagues (see Appendix C) to find out what educational games they currently use in the classroom and what they feel are the benefits of using games. Similarly, I surveyed my students (see Appendix D) after implementing each of the activities. Due to the young nature of my subjects, these surveys were executed via informal discussions. I used the student's responses to the survey items to guide my instruction and to ultimately decide on which resources to include on my website.

I obtained IRB approval through the University of Florida to conduct my study. This IRB included parental consent forms (see Appendix A) asking for permission for their children to participate in the study, as well as one asking for the consent of fellow educators (see Appendix B) to answer a survey (see Appendix C) regarding how they use educational games in the classroom.

### **Subjects and Research Site**

My first grade students at Star Academy (a pseudonym), a charter school in the Midwest were the field testers for my games and playful learning activities. My charter school is

primarily half Caucasian and half African American. There were a total of 28 students that were asked to participate in the study. I received permission from 15 parents of 9 girls and 6 boys. I only included responses from participants with parent permission in this study. I asked a total of 53 classroom teachers at my school to participate, of which 9 replied to this survey. I also invited all of the art teachers within my charter system, a total of 51 art teachers, of which 6 responded. Adult participants were asked to sign a letter of consent (see Appendix B) in order to participate in this study.

The research took place within my classroom at Star Academy (a pseudonym). The school is located in a suburb of a major Midwest city. The research was done during my first grader's normal 40 minute art periods, where I see them once a week. I field tested my playful learning activities and educational games from May 14, 2013 to June 14, 2013. My principal gave his permission to include my first grade students in this study.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

I chose an action research approach to my data collection and analysis. Action research can “heighten teacher professionalism, lead to positive educational change, expand the knowledge base for teaching, and provide a platform for teachers’ voices in educational reform” (Dawson, 2012, p. 117). Data collection was based on observation and informal surveys (see Appendix C and D). I kept a teacher’s journal to record my findings.

I also surveyed my students after implementing each educational game or playful activity by discussing what they liked about the game/activity, what they didn’t like, what they would do differently if they played it again, and what they learned from the game/activity. I was unable to determine if the students actually learned anything from the activity unless stated in their survey response. I decoded my observations and notes by separating each activity into two

different categories: successful or not successful. I used a rating scale to decide if an activity was successful or not based on student responses from survey questions as well as ease of play for the instructor. The rating scale was used for each activity and included: ease of play (to be decided by the instructor) and if the students liked or disliked the activity. Each of these groupings was given a score out of 10. A game was considered successful under these guidelines if the total score was 17/20 or higher. The action research approach to this study allowed me to better my art practices as well as create a resource for other art educators to incorporate educational games and playful activities in their classroom.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Throughout my study I focused on playing with materials, role-playing games, and educational games. Although I understand the influence of digital games on my students, I did not have the technical support to use digital games within my classroom. I also focused my study on first grade students. There are plenty of opportunities to use games successfully in a first grade classroom but many of the games implemented could be altered to meet the needs of older students. Other limitations included that I conducted this study at the end of the year; this restricted the amount of activities I could implement within the classroom. Also, surveying the teachers at the end of the year may have hindered the amount of responses I received. Another limitation includes observing students only within my first grade classroom and surveying only educators within my own charter school.

### **Findings**

The purpose of this study was to see what types games of are currently being used, how educational games can be used in the classroom to enhance playful learning, the benefits to using games in the classroom to enhance playful learning, and to discover how play can be applied to a classroom setting (my own) successfully. Besides researching what art games are currently

available, I implemented many of them in my first grade art classroom, assessed their educational value and how well the students enjoyed playing each of the games or learning activities. I determined if they were successful by their ease of play and if the students had fun playing them. My goal was to create a playful learning environment that would enhance social skills and self-discovery learning. I evaluated educational games and playful learning activities to establish if they were fun, educational, and engaging.

I used the findings from my teaching experiences to archive my work and to create a website resource for parents and educators of young children to enhance playful learning through art. This website can be found at [www.playfullearningthroughart.weebly.com](http://www.playfullearningthroughart.weebly.com). My findings have been organized according to their subsections found on my website: Playing with Materials, Role-Playing Activities, and Educational Games. I include my successes within each of the categories including any surprises that may have occurred.

### **Playing With Materials**

Before doing this research project I had previously used art centers to offer the students an opportunity to explore a variety of materials. This research pushed me to create more student-centered art centers with minimal guidance or disruption from the teacher. I discovered that by limiting the materials, I was limiting the results. My favorite of the centers was allowing the students to play with paint.

Playing with paint can be a challenge as a teacher of 28 first grade students, with one sink, and minimal space. I was always very rigid with my paint center expectations. Brushes, water, and paper were the only materials provided. I did have the students use both watercolor and tempera paints to give some variety but it was still lacking something. The students were always engaged in each of the centers, but were they having fun? For my research, I put aside my

over planned lessons and had a discussion with my students about what things can be used to paint. I also thought more outside of the box with the materials I provided including: marbles, magnetic wands and beaded chains, yarn, sand, tape, and sponges to name a few of the possible tools provided. I have to admit with all of the supplies mentioned I felt a bit overwhelmed by the unknowns that these materials brought.

Before the centers began I gave a brief explanation of painting expectations and had the students begin. The room was quiet while the students diligently chose their materials and got to work. Their play was thought provoking and more experimental than I could have imagined. It was powerful to see them exploring the different materials like a pro. They were having fun! I realized that by giving them the freedom to explore with traditional and non-traditional materials, it made it fun. I assessed this activity using a checklist (see Appendix E) to determine if they were using different materials and techniques. I also expected them to share their findings with myself and their peers. Similarly, they were excited to share their experiences with their homeroom teacher when she came to pick them up at the end of class. The next class, the students found each of their paintings and we sat in a circle to discuss the experience. The connections that students made were inspiring; the outcomes of their paint explorations revealed beautiful uninhibited art.

### **Role-Playing Activities**

I had never done any role-playing activities in a classroom environment prior to this research project. I like the drama and the playfulness that role-playing encourages but I wasn't sure what it would look like in a classroom? The activities listed on my website inspire students to take on the role of a museum curator, characters found in art, and an art detective. With the

use of props and plenty of art examples (I have a collection of art postcards that I used) for students to explore, these playful activities were a big hit with my students.

My favorite activity was Picture Hopping, which had the students become characters within the artworks. I began this activity by encouraging numerous students to demonstrate several scenes I had pre-selected. I gave them some guidance at first on where the scene was to take place and what was happening. For instance, I asked them to imagine they were two characters in a Renaissance painting (I projected the image on the board so that everyone could see it). They were to pretend to be brothers planning a birthday party. Giving them examples to role-play helped them to grasp the idea but once they got it they took off with it.

After demonstrating role-playing examples, students had the opportunity to go through piles of art and create their own situations. I had students become animals, kings, queens, superheroes, and many other characters. They were having so much fun playing different roles. This taught me to allow the students to not only look at art but to experience art through play.

### **Educational Games**

I have always entertained using games in the classroom to enhance student learning, but I was unaware of what games were out there and available for classroom use. What art games could I make and implement in a classroom setting? What games were other teachers using? All of these questions were at the forefront of my gaming research. I asked both classroom teachers and other art teachers what games they used and what did they feel were the educational benefits of using games in the classroom? I was surprised by my findings. Out of the 15 teachers that responded to my survey (see Appendix C) only 9 said they currently use games in the classroom and several of the individuals that said they did use games used them only as a reward. This shocked me. Especially teaching in a school with primarily newer teachers, one would think that

they would use more forward thinking approaches to instructional delivery. Also surprising, most of the games that were mentioned as a resource for classroom instruction were games that were purchased. I would think that as art teachers we would be more apt to create our own games to use in the art room.

The idea behind the survey was for me to learn about new types of games and how they were implemented in the classroom. I consequently was not introduced to any new games that I could implement in the art room. Although, it was refreshing to hear about why the teachers that currently use educational games find them an asset in their classroom. Benefits include: allowing students to learn from experience, an opportunity for students to collaborate with peers, games are a good motivator, they can enrich lessons, they're fun, they can reinforce concepts, and students get to learn through experiential learning. These are all compelling reasons to incorporate educational games in the classroom.

### **Reflections, Conclusion, and Recommendations**

As I reflect on these past classroom experiences with games and playful learning I am reminded and refreshed by the energy and the creativity that young students bring to the art room. I have found that educational games can be used to enhance playful learning by the general nature that games instigate play. Throughout my research I have also found, created, and implemented several educational games that have been successfully utilized in a classroom setting. These games can be found on my website, [www.playfullearningthroughart.weebly.com](http://www.playfullearningthroughart.weebly.com). I have discovered that games benefit life skill development, social skills, and are a great motivator to enhance a student's desire to learn. My research has also taught me that play has many definitions and implications including that it is fun, engaging, flexible, and a novelty in the classroom.

The goals of my research were to explore playful learning and games in the early elementary art room and to create a website resource that will encourage both parents and teachers to incorporate playful learning in the lives of their young children. Games can be beneficial for a student's cognitive development, social growth, and enhancing a student's motivation to learn (Oden & Asher, 1977; Crowley & Siegler, 1999; Katter, 1988; Susi, 1988). Also games encourage playful learning through exploration. According to Szekely (1991), "The element of playfulness that characterizes all creative investigations helps me generate new ideas and sustain the freedom necessary to plan and execute a piece of art" (p. 1). Play and art overlap one another in that they incorporate similar creative processes (Szekely, 1991). Through action research I was able to compile a total of 11 successful educational games and playful learning activities to assist parents and educators of young children in developing playful learning through art. Throughout the remainder of my conclusion, I will discuss and interpret my findings as well as talk about the significance, implications, and recommendations derived from my research.

### **Discussion and Interpretation of Findings**

I believe that there are two different types of play: purposeful play and exploratory play. Although I did not come up with these words in regards to play, I did choose to categorize them as the two quintessential classifications of play. Purposeful play includes planned activities and games that are often guided by an instructor. These activities are designed to enhance cooperative learning, positive socialization, and good sportsmanship. Purposeful play can also include teaching and reviewing specific learning objectives generated by the instructor. Sports, board games, and card games would all be examples of purposeful play. Often this type of play encourages competitive behaviors. Purposeful play is fun, organized, and structured. Other

examples of purposeful play activities can be located on my website, [www.playfullearningthroughart.weebly.com](http://www.playfullearningthroughart.weebly.com), under Educational Games.

Exploratory play is a student-centered approach to learning. Students are encouraged to learn by making their own connections and construct their own knowledge. The educator's role for exploratory play is simply to give the students minimal guidelines and expectations and to let the students explore different materials and processes on their own. Examples of exploratory play often coincide with choice-based art education and art centers (<http://knowledgeloom.org/tab/index.jsp>). Art centers allow for students to explore a multitude of materials to play with and explore. Art centers can be guided or can be left up to the child on which centers will be explored. Examples of art centers can be found on my website, [www.playfullearningthroughart.weebly.com](http://www.playfullearningthroughart.weebly.com), under Playing with Materials. Also on my website are examples of role-playing activities to play in the art room. These would also be considered exploratory play. In my study, I asked students to take on the role of art auctioneers, art curators, and even characters found within artworks. Students took ownership of these roles and utilized props to define their characters. In exploratory play, students must take control of their own learning experiences and be allotted the freedom to explore their own ideas.

Play in any capacity can be educational. Both purposeful play and exploratory play offer different types of educational benefits. Benefits for purposeful play include students learning how to follow directions, play in a group setting with peers successfully, learn good sportsmanship, and the capacity to understand that effort creates ability. The benefits of using exploratory play like purposeful play also include the ability to play successfully in a group setting but exploratory play focuses on the child making decisions and challenging themselves to

learn through exploration. It allows children the freedom to make mistakes and encourages them to be themselves.

As a result of my student surveys (see Appendix D), I re-examined each game to determine if it was fun and at the appropriate level for my first grade students. Several of the games found on my website had to be readjusted to be less challenging in order to maintain the enjoyment of the activity. I also used my teacher surveys (see Appendix C) to try and understand why they used games in the classroom and to gain insights into what types of games they were using.

Through my experiences, I discovered that integrating play in the classroom can be an overwhelming feat. With all of the objectives and expectations that accompany a contemporary art education curriculum, when does one find the time to develop and play games with students and where does one begin? I have always used games as a way to review or introduce material in a fun and innovative way, but the idea of play as this organic, non-structured activity with 28 inner-city children made my palms sweat. It was when I introduced these role-playing activities with my students that I could see the possible future of exploratory play in my classroom.

### **Significance, Implications, and Recommendations**

As I look back on the beginnings of this project, I am reminded of rigid lesson plans and what now seems like a lackluster attempt to have fun in the art room. At the time I thought I was doing pretty well for my fourth year of teaching K-8 art. I now see the possibilities of a more student-centered approach to learning; a much happier me and much happier students. Through the use of my website, [www.playfullearningthroughart.weebly.com](http://www.playfullearningthroughart.weebly.com) and my Scoop.it page, <http://www.scoop.it/t/educational-games-used-to-enhance-instructional-delivery>, educators and parents are able to easily implement playful learning activities in their classroom or at home.

I also wanted to re-examine what playful learning looks like in the classroom, I plan to renovate the checklist (see Appendix E) that I used to assess the students during the painting centers. Instead of assessing if students used a certain amount of materials and/or processes to produce art, I would plan to evaluate how many of students are engaged in the activity, how many students laughed throughout the activity, and how many students invited me to share in their learning by showing or explaining their findings to me throughout the activity. I find that these factors are more important than how many materials/techniques they utilized.

For any elementary art teacher teaching today, I would recommend trying several of the activities on my website, [www.playfullearningthroughart.weebly.com](http://www.playfullearningthroughart.weebly.com), to integrate play into their curriculums and into the lives of their students. From there the possibilities are as endless as your children's imagination. Guided activities, including games, will give students a different playful experience and are just as educational. By incorporating both purposeful play and exploratory play in the classroom, students will not only be learning art but other pertinent social skills. I feel there should be more research done on how playful activities help students in the long term academically. I am also curious on what age playful learning should end in the classroom environment; or if it should end at all? I find it difficult to envision this type of learning at the middle school level or beyond.

### **Conclusion**

I have always thought that the use of games in the classroom was an innovative way to engage students in learning; but now after the completion of my research I feel it is just a spring board for what is possible in the classroom. It is because of my research that I have since grown and evolved my classroom practices to become more playful. Not only have I found that it is more fun for the students, but I am able to have fun as well. This project has made me rethink

how I approach my art lessons. It is neither plausible nor beneficial to have everything planned out; I should let things happen more spontaneously. My objectives will remain well-defined but the process will become more playful, fun, engaging, and student-centered.

My website can be found at [www.playfullearningthroughart.weebly.com](http://www.playfullearningthroughart.weebly.com). It explores play with materials, role-playing activities, and educational games and how they can benefit both educators and parents. Not only do I plan on using the activities found on my website for future lessons, I want to build on these ideas and explore how play can be a principal force in my curriculum. My Scoop.it collection found at [www.scoop.it/t/educational-games-used-to-enhance-instructional-delivery](http://www.scoop.it/t/educational-games-used-to-enhance-instructional-delivery) also has many educational game resources for educators, parents, and students to explore. The idea of play is continuously evolving and gaining recognition for its educational value in the classroom. It is our job as art educators to give students a creative outlet that doesn't resemble a traditional classroom and invite our students to play.

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## Appendix A

### Parental Consent Forms

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am a graduate student in the Department of Art Education at the University of Florida, conducting research on instruction delivery in first grade under the supervision of Dr. Elizabeth Delacruz. The purpose of this study is to investigate the use of art educational games in the classroom to enhance study learning and motivation. The results of this study may help art educators find alternative methods when delivering instruction within the first grade. With your permission, I would like to ask your child to volunteer for this research.

The research will take place in the art room during the student's normal art time. The students will be asked to participate in various educational art games that will explore the current art curriculum. With your permission, I would observe and document my findings. I also plan to take pictures of the student's artwork throughout the activities. The student's identity will remain anonymous throughout the study. You and your child's identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Participation or non-participation in this study will not affect the child's grades.

This study will begin May 14, 2013 and will conclude at the end of the school year, June 14, 2013 (approximately 6 class periods). You and your child have the right to withdraw from this study at any time even at the end of the school year without consequence. Compensation will not be given to participants of the study. There are no direct benefits or risks for participating in the study. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at [83.jdeluca@nhamail.com](mailto:83.jdeluca@nhamail.com) or my university supervisor at [edelacruz@ufl.edu](mailto:edelacruz@ufl.edu). Questions or concerns about your child's rights as a research participant may be directed to the IRB02 office, University of Florida, Box 112250, Gainesville, FL 32611, (352) 392-0433.

Jennifer DeLuca  
Visual Arts Teacher

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I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily give my consent for my child, \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in Mrs. Jennifer DeLuca's study of using educational art games to enhance student learning. I have received a copy of this description.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Date

Child's Homeroom Teacher \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### Adult Consent Forms

Dear Educator,

I am a graduate student in the Department of Art Education at the University of Florida, conducting research on instruction delivery in first grade under the supervision of Dr. Elizabeth Delacruz. The purpose of this study is to investigate the use of art educational games in the classroom to enhance study learning and motivation. The results of this study may help art educators find alternative methods when delivering instruction within the first grade.

I am asking you to participate in a short survey asking about your knowledge of educational games. Your identity will be kept confidential throughout the study.

Compensation will not be given to participants of the study. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at [83.jdeluca@nhamail.com](mailto:83.jdeluca@nhamail.com) or my university supervisor at [edelacruz@ufl.edu](mailto:edelacruz@ufl.edu). Questions or concerns about your child's rights as a research participant may be directed to the IRB02 office, University of Florida, Box 112250, Gainesville, FL 32611, (352) 392-0433.

If you agree to participate in this study and answer a short survey please sign and return this to me as soon as possible. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

Jennifer DeLuca  
Visual Arts Teacher

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I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily give my consent to participate in Mrs. Jennifer DeLuca's study of using educational art games to enhance student learning. I have received a copy of this description.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name/ Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature/ Date

## **Appendix C**

### Teacher Survey Questions

Do you currently use educational games in your classroom?

If yes, what are they and what grades do you play them with?

Do you think games are effective and beneficial for student learning? Why or why not?

## **Appendix D**

### Student Survey Questions

(Will be asked in a discussion style forum after each educational game is played)

Raise your hand if you liked playing this game? Why?

Raise your hand if you were not a big fan of this game? Why?

If you were to play this game again, how would you play it differently?

What did you learn by playing this game?



### **Author Biography**

My name is Jennifer DeLuca and I am an art educator, artist, and a researcher. I have been teaching Kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade for the past 4 years at a charter school in Michigan. I teach visual arts to over 600 students. I graduated December 2008 from Youngstown State University in Ohio.

I enjoy working in mixed media. I am interested in abandoned architecture and the effects of nature on manmade structures. I use the journalistic nature of photography to record the state of old buildings and use paint and gesso to mimic the natural textures of the building materials.

As a researcher, I am interested in making the classroom experience more exciting by exploring games and play in the classroom. I have almost completed a Master of Arts degree at the University of Florida. I plan to graduate in August 2013.