ART EDUCATION THROUGH THE LENS OF PLAY

Rogier Arents   Master Education in Arts   Piet Zwart Institute

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PROLOGUE

ART EDUCATION THROUGH THE LENS OF PLAY

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The most engaged learning community.

Dear reader,

I'd like to welcome you to this little quest into the role of play in art education. It all started with the decision to enrol in the Master Education in Arts at Piet Zwart Institute (MEiA) in 2023. I had just started teaching art and design two years earlier at ArtEZ University of Arts, and I was eager to develop my pedagogical and didactic abilities. Secondly, I wanted to find out to what extent I could combine my work as a designer/artist and educator. I had realised that my own portfolio was already full of educational potential.

My interest in play in education grew through the pleasant learning environment and the engaged learning community the tutors and students have built at MEiA. These circumstances helped me to be myself in class, and to show the playful side of myself. I'm sure that being a father of a five-year-old daughter heavily influenced my research interest. There was basically no escape from playing games with my daughter. I realised that a lot of the things that children learn happen through play. This made me question why play is not structurally embedded in education. Or is it?
My work as a tutor at ArtEZ formed an interesting and stable environment to perform practical research through several experiments.

Enjoy reading this research document! If you have any questions or wish to talk about something related, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Best regards,
Rogier Arents

A first playful exploration

Goal of the Research

The goal of the research was to find out how play and education relate to one another. In a more practical sense, the goal was to find out what role play could have in my classes at ArtEZ. Through research I tried to get insight into which forms of play could be useful in education. I hoped that by looking at art education through the lens of play, it would open up the educational field for many didactic opportunities.

Relevance to education:
This research was an exploration of the primal forces that drive education. Education, in a way, reflects our view on who we are as human beings. Perhaps the name of our species already hints at the core business of education: Homo Sapiens, the 'knowledgeable man'. Besides the transfer of knowledge, education is also concerned with the social aspect of the human being: Homo Socius. In art and design education, there is extra focus on the making aspect of humans: Homo Faber. Additionally, this research project studied the relationship between education and another strong human force, the play aspect of the human being: Homo Ludens.

Research Questions

How can play be applied to build a pleasant and creative study environment in a Bachelor-level art and design class?

Sub-questions:
- What is play?
- How does play relate to education?
- How does play relate to the context of ArtEZ?
- How can play be implemented in the classroom?
- What types of play are suitable at school?
- What challenges are met when play is integrated in class?

Plan of Action

The plan was to design, execute, and reflect on a series of experiments within the context of the department of Bachelor Education in Arts & Design at ArtEZ University of Arts. The experiments were designed using the 'Playful Participatory Research' method and were analysed using the 'Gibbs Reflection Cycle'. Meanwhile, I did theoretical research on play in relation to education. The theoretical and practical research went hand in hand and fed each other.

Structure of the Thesis

The structure of this thesis holds parts of an academic thesis and parts of a play, and sometimes you will feel it's somewhat in between the two. The thesis consists of multiple booklets that are not necessarily meant to be read in a set order.

You're now reading the *Prologue*, which describes the starting point of the research, the research questions, and the plan of action. The *Theoretical Framework* is partly written in the form of a play that contains my synthesis of theories on play and education. The *Practical Research* outlines the context and research methods; it describes the experiments and gives answers to practical research questions. In the *Epilogue* you will find my conclusion to the main research question and a reflection on the research as a whole.

Researcher at work

The DBKV department-wing on the 2nd floor of ArtEZ in Zwolle

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

ART EDUCATION THROUGH THE LENS OF PLAY

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Introduction

Wondering about education:
During the first year of MEiA we were exposed to many different views on art education through input from the tutors and students. The book *In Defence of the School* (2012) by Masschelein and Simons, which was brought to us in the Practice and Research Seminar, resonated with me the most. This book caught my attention due to its conservative approach; the authors embrace the school instead of criticising it, as I had seen in texts of many other authors. I found the idea of finding out what really works in school much more helpful than finding out what doesn't work in school. Masschelein and Simons' summary of the essence of school in eight scholastic features gave me a very thorough and refreshing perspective on education.

Wondering about play:
While studying I was working on a graphic design project for an exhibition. I was interested in implementing educational activities and therefore I read the book *Activity-Based Teaching in the Art Museum (*2012) by E. Kai-Kee, L. Latina, and L, Sadoyan. The book introduced me to the theme of play in education and many books followed, among others: *Homo Ludens* (1950) by J. Huizinga, *We Have to Play* (2019) by R. Martens, *Ludodidactics* (2022) by J.W. Renger and E. Hoogendoorn, *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997) by B. Sutton-Smith.

Main framework

The main theoretical framework is written in the form of a play. It's a fictional conversation between me and authors, theorists, and researchers in the field of play and education. The conversation leads to a synthesis between theory on education and theory on play. Before the play starts, I'll first give background information on the main characters of the play.

The primary source used in the field of education is *In Defence of School: A Public Issue* by Masschelein and Simons. In the field of play I used many sources because no single theory on play had completely satisfied me. It is important to note from which perspective the writers approach play. Some perspectives are the evolutionary (Karl Groos), anthropological (Johan Huizinga), educational (Rob Martens) psychological (Peter Gray), game design (Willem-Jan Renger), and multidisciplinary (Brian Sutton-Smith) points of view. Especially insightful were the book *We Have to Play* by Rob Martens and the summary of *Definitions of Play* (2019) by Peter Gray.

Background of Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons:

Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons are both full professors at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at the University of Leuven (BE). They research the societal role of education. Jan Masschelein is considered one of the most innovative pedagogues within the Dutch language area.[1]

Playful activity on the question how play relates to education

Close-up of the resulting mind-map

Masschelein and Simons wrote the book *In Defence of the School: a Public Issue* in reaction to several reformations that place the school in service of society. The authors warn against this development and advocate for relating back to the essence of the Greek school. The authors describe the essence of the school in eight scholastic features: a matter suspension, profanation, attention, technology, equality, love, preparation, and pedagogical responsibility.

Background of Rob Martens:
Rob Martens is full professor at the faculty of Educational Sciences at the Open University of the Netherlands. He has a background in psychological studies and from this perspective he wrote the book *We Have to Play: How Education Benefits from an Exploration of Our Nature*, which is about the importance of play for learning and the deficit of play opportunity in education. Martens doesn't see play as something to decorate education, to make it more fun, but as an activity to fully grasp the attention and commitment of a student.[2]

Background of Peter Gray:
Peter Gray is a research professor of psychology after retiring from the position of full professor at Boston College. He has a background in psychology and developed an interest in play and child development. He has become known for his work on the interaction between education and play. Very helpful to me was his *Definitions of Play*, in which he describes in five characteristics the essence of play.[3]

2. https://nivoz.nl/nl/spelen-met-rob-martens-vier-on-line-avonden-over-kunst-onderwijs-en-mens-zijn
3. http://www.scholarpedia.org/article/Definitions_of_Play

Characters:

Rogier Arents – Designer, artist and educational researcher who likes to think out loud.

Johan Huizinga – Dutch historian and one of the founders of modern cultural history.
Based on *Homo Ludens, a Study of the Play Element in Culture.*

Rob Martens – Dutch educational scientist.
Based on *We Have to Play: How Education Benefits from an Exploration of Our Nature*. Especially chapter two, *How biologists and evolutionary psychologists view the world,* and chapter seven, *The relationship between play and intrinsic motivation*.

Brian Sutton-Smith – Play theorist from New Zealand.
Based on *The Ambiguity of Play.*

Peter Gray – American psychologist.
Based on *Definitions of Play*

Thijs Witty – Tutor at MEiA - Piet Zwart Institute.

Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons – Belgian educational scientists.
Based on *In Defence of the School: A Public Issue*. Especially the parts: *Introduction: what is the scholastic?*; chapter six, *A matter of suspension*; chapter seven, *A matter of profanation*; and chapter eight, *A matter of attention*.

ACT 1
WHAT iS PLAY?

ROGIER ARENTS: By coincidence I read the chapter *A theory of play in the museum* in the book *Activity-based Teaching in the Art Museum*. It was about playful activities that are organised for art classes in museums, and it surprised me that play can be utilised in education—that play can be taken seriously in education. I asked myself, could I also bring elements of play into my classes? And what would that mean? Would it become more fun for me as a teacher and for my students? Would it really help make learning possible? But let's start with the question: What is play, actually?

BRIAN SUTTON-SMITH: I don't want to be cynical and destroy your theoretical framework right away, but I have to give a warning here. After studying and writing about play for more than 25 years, I have come to the conclusion that play is something that we all do, and we all know how it feels, but it's silly to make any theoretical statements on play; it's just too ambiguous!

ROGIER ARENTS: I'm sorry, I seemed to have provoked you with my question. So, it stops here?

JOHAN HUIZINGA: Ah! Come on, Brian! You are being cynical. Let's be silly now and try to say some things that could define play. I myself wrote the book *Homo Ludens* (the playing man) about the play element in culture. It is a bit outdated in its use of language, but it's definitely still worth reading. I studied play from the perspective of anthropology. Although I have to mention that play is not unique to humans; we can recognise play in animals too.

ROB MARTENS: You're right; there are many animals that play! In animal play you can always find an echo of their specialty. Kittens, for example, love to play games of hunt and chase because that's what they'll do when they become full-grown cats. Actually, you find traces of many forms of hunting games in human play, too. In children's games like 'tag' and 'hide and seek', but also in sports like hockey, football, or handball you can recognise a resemblance of group hunts. You could say that a game of hunt is a safe way to practice hunting.

ROGIER ARENTS: When you describe play like this, it sounds to me like play is something we naturally do to learn something.

JOHAN HUIZINGA: It definitely is. I call it 'play-instinct'. But more interesting is the question of why we have a play-instinct. Why is a game of hunt a safe way to practice hunting? The answer is: because it's not for real! Play is imaginative! The kittens that you mentioned don't earn their food with

their play. If they started hunting for real, they might be killed by the prey immediately, or they wouldn't catch any food and would die from hunger. Their mother takes care of the first needs while the kittens learn to hunt for themselves. And the kittens just play because it's fun to do.

ROB MARTENS: The more intelligent animals are, the longer their childhood takes. Childhood is the time that young animals don't have to take care of themselves yet. The young animals need this time to be able to use their smartness. It's like a built-in learning period. During this period, a child can spend time on things that are 'not real'. Play is not real life, it's pretend. Our natural state, especially for children, is that of play.

ROGIER ARENTS: I truly recognise this in my daughter. The only thing she wants to do all day is play. She's five years old now and is fascinated—no, obsessed—with role play. My partner and I are constantly being involved in traveling games in which we take all possible forms of public transport to reach fictive destinations. At the weekends a game can take up a whole day. Lunch is served in the airplane and visits to a real playground are scheduled in between flights. Alongside our travels we're playing house, games of fight, hide & seek, and tag, as well as reading books and crafting. In the evening, she doesn't want to go to bed because she wants to dance, read a book, or play a card game, and in the end, she falls asleep with a lullaby.

BRIAN SUTTON-SMITH: She's going to be a smart kid, you can tell. Alright, I admit I was being cynical at the beginning. I'm starting to recognise a couple of things that you mentioned about play. You're saying that your daughter involves you in many games. And it seems that the desire to play comes from herself; it's not initiated by you. I would say she is intrinsically motivated to play. It seems there is no external goal: the play is done for the sake of play.

ROGIER ARENTS: For her, yes, but as parents we are sometimes tired of playing. But we play along, for as long as we can keep up. Sometimes we wish that she would play more on her own, but she hardly does. Only when there are other kids to play with—then she leaves us to do the household.

ROB MARTENS: That's the social aspect of play. One of the strong features of humans is their capability of living in large groups. We are very social animals. And this is what you see in human play: we play to learn to live together, to collaborate. Even when kids play alone they often imagine being with others; they play with puppets or stuffed animals, for example.

ROGIER ARENTS: My daughter even had three imaginary friends to play with!

BRIAN SUTTON-SMITH: I'm not surprised; look at who her father is talking to! Alright, I'd like to summarise what we have been talking about. We could say now that play is self-chosen and self-directed. It's intrinsically motivated, its imaginative, and we discussed its social nature.

PETER GRAY: I'd like to introduce the rule-based nature of play. Play may be a freely chosen activity, but it's not a free-form activity. Play always has a structure, and that structure derives from rules in the players' minds. In social play, the rules must be shared, or at least partially shared, by all of the players. The rules of play provide boundaries within which the actions must occur, but they do not precisely dictate each action; they always leave room for creativity. Activities that are precisely prescribed by rules are better referred to as rituals rather than as play. And I have to mention that each type of play has a different type of rules.

JOHAN HUIZINGA: Yes, Peter! I'm also convinced of the rule-based nature of play. But I've also been criticised for focussing too much on the competitive element of play. Roger Callois, who worked further on my play theory, says that there are also forms of play without rules, or at least not strictly based on rules. He made the distinction between Paidea, for games without rules, and Ludus, for games with rules. He further distinguished four different forms of play: Agôn, for competition; Alea, for chance; Mimicry, for pretending; and Ilinx, for kick.

ROGIER ARENTS: I'm impressed that you keep up with the developments in play theory so well! I have to say that I am attracted to the idea that play can also be loosely based on rules. Contemporary play theory is really obsessed with gaming; that's of course where play theory gets applied, and that's were the money is made and invested. I recognise these forms of play from the book *Ludodidactics*, which is about using game design strategies for educational use. I'm going to try to work with that as well.

PETER GRAY: The last thing I want to say is that I think that play is an activity, so it takes place with an active state of mind. Active but freed from pressure or stress because play takes place in a fantasy world. Play is not a reaction to external goals or demands from the real world, and therefore players don't face consequences outside the fantasy world.

ROGIER ARENTS: Thanks for all your thoughts, guys! Let's leave it here; a lot has already been said. It is still puzzling me a bit, but I think I will just get down to it and do some experiments based on these thoughts on play. Perhaps by playing; by putting theory into practice, I will also get to understand play in a more abstract sense.

	Agôn (Competition)	Alea (Chance)	Mimicry (Pretending)	Ilinx (Kick)
Paidea	'Who gets there first'	Heads or tails'	Tag	Horseback riding
Ludus	Sports	Lottery	Theater	Rollercoaster

Scheme with different forms of play (Roger Collois)

ACT 2
HOW DOES PLAY RELATE TO EDUCATION?

ROGIER ARENTS: I always thought that play and school were the opposite of each other. I thought you could play outside of school, in the lunch breaks on the playground, and after school at home, but definitely not during class.

THIJS WITTY: Yes, let's talk about education! Last year I gave you several critical texts on education from different authors. What did you think of them, and was there a text that you found interesting?

ROGIER ARENTS: For me it was interesting to be introduced to these critical works. But it was also strange to look so critically at something I haven't studied. I mean, I don't have a Bachelor in Education in Arts, and I only started teaching three years ago. So for me, there is also a lot to learn before I feel I am able to critically analyse.

THIJS WITTY: I can understand, but on the other hand, you have experienced many years of education as a student, so you know how it works, right? You're only perceiving education from a different perspective at the moment.

ROGIER ARENTS: From two different perspectives actually, yes: as a student here at MEiA and as a teacher at ArtEZ. But to answer your question: I was most attracted to the book *In Defence of the School: A Public Issue* by Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons. While most critical texts are progressive—they look for alternatives in education to reinvent the existing—Masschelein and Simons take a more conservative standpoint. They see something worthy in school, and they try to conserve this by defining the essence of the school and defining what disturbs this. How they say it is: what is 'taming' the school.

JAN MASSCHELEIN: I'm so happy to hear you liked our book! Shall I try to give a short introduction to what we think the school is?

THIJS WITTY: I'm all ears! But remember, Rogier is doing research on play in education, so let's focus on this aspect.

MAARTEN SIMONS: Alright! First, I have to introduce you all to our concept of school: the word school comes from the Greek word *scholé*, which has the meaning of 'free time'. This is in the literal sense, in that school was seen as a liberation from the duties of work or household. But it was also liberating in the sense that the child was temporarily placed outside the family's zone of influence. The child momentarily stopped being a 'son' or a 'daughter' and became a student. The student is 'suspended' from their

daily reality. This is what we think is the essence of the school: that it takes a child out of the destiny of the family and gives them free time to become an independent person.

ROGIER ARENTS: That actually really sounds like a liberation; it must have been a great invention! But are these arguments still valid today in a world where we have a lot of free time?

JAN MASSCHELEIN: I understand what you mean, but with 'free time' we don't mean leisure. The free time that we mean is specifically time made free by school. It is time made free to study the world, mainly in the form of subjects and skills, and for the students to study themselves in relation to the world.

ROGIER ARENTS: What school do you actually mean?

MAARTEN SIMONS: We actually don't specify; it could be any school, really.

ROGIER ARENTS: Art academies as well?

JAN MASSCHELEIN: I'm sure you will recognise many things that would be applicable to your teaching situation in ArtEZ.

ROGIER ARENTS: Ok, please continue…

MAARTEN SIMONS: Alright. Let's take the second step: it's not only the child who is liberated by school, but the subjects are also liberated. This we call 'profanation'. When a teacher introduces a subject, for example writing a thesis, then the writing of a thesis itself becomes the subject of study. A teacher would propose an exercise to learn how to write a thesis, and not to achieve a goal through writing the thesis.

ROGIER ARENTS: Hmm, okay, but the goal of writing a thesis is also to convey your research in a presentable way, right?

JAN MASSCHELEIN: Yes, it has, of course, its function within school, but we're trying to say that it doesn't have a function outside of school. For example, is your thesis meant to be published? Are you going to earn money on publishing your thesis? I'm not sure if I would collaborate with you on this text if you were.

ROGIER ARENTS: No, you're right, I'm not doing it for money or fame. I'm doing it to finish my master's programme.

MAARTEN SIMONS: That's what we mean. In this way, writing a thesis can be studied for the sake of study, and a skill can be developed for the sake of the skill, not for productive use. The combination of 'suspension' and 'profanation' generates attention to subjects or skills. 'Attention' is what we define as the third feature of the school. It is basically the role of the teacher to create a situation that captures the attention of students and focuses it on a certain subject.

JAN MASSCHELEIN: School brings something into play. It takes things out of their usual place in society and gives them space to stand on their own, in a more open and free way. That makes it possible to explore a subject with fresh eyes. That doesn't mean school has no rules or isn't serious. It just means that the rules and seriousness come from the subject itself, not from what society says it should be.

ROGIER ARENTS: Is this form of play similar to, for example, children's play?

MAARTEN SIMONS: I'm not sure… I mean it as a figure of speech. We don't aim to let students play, in the verbal sense, but the subjects and skills to study are themselves brought into play.

ROGIER ARENTS: Yes, this confuses me a bit, but I feel there is something to discover here.

JOHAN HUIZINGA: Let me help you a bit, Rogier. I heard your conversation about school, play, and suspension, and I wanted to inform you about the term 'Magic Circle' that I mentioned in my book *Homo Ludens*. I used this term as a more abstract form to define a playground–the time and place, separated from the ordinary world, in an imaginative world. It was not me but Eric Zimmerman (among others) who coined the term in the

magic circle   **real world**

context of game design. In games, the magic circle is the time and space in which the normal rules and reality of the world are suspended and replaced by the artificial reality of a game world.

ROGIER ARENTS: Thank you for jumping into this conversation, Johan. I definitely see the correlation between the suspension from reality that happens at school and the suspension from reality that happens in play. Though they are also very different: the suspension at school is defined by the time and the space created by school; it's the school-time and the school-building. Suspension in play, although also defined by time and space, is harder to define. It's more volatile.

JOHAN HUIZINGA: If you look at play in general, yes. But if you become more specific about a certain type of play, then you will see that it has a strictly defined playground. For example the lines of a football pitch. I wanted to say something else about the magic circle. It is not seen as something impenetrable but rather as something porous; there is a relationship between virtual worlds and the outside world.

ROGIER ARENTS: I could link this porosity of the magic circle to the idea that something 'of the world' is brought into school. Right, Jan and Maarten? You called it 'profanation', I think. Something of the world, a subject or skill, is brought into play—into school—into the magic circle.

JAN MASSCHELEIN: Ah, I see now, that's interesting how you put it in the perspective of play. But I would like to remind you that school is not play, even though you are starting to see some correlations. Maybe in these correlations between school and play we can find some underlying principles of learning. School is designed by man to support learning, and similarly, play is designed by nature to support learning.

ROGIER ARENTS: I'd like to try to make a model for school, based on this idea of the magic circle. A circle reminds me of the circular shape of a ball. A school makes me think of a square: the school building, the classroom, the table, the chalk or digi-board, the notebook; they all resemble a square or rectangular shape. So, I'll propose to depict the suspension created by school as a 'magic square'. Didn't you mention something magical about school, Jan and Maarten?

school   **real world**

JAN MASSCHELEIN: Magic? … Oh yes! There is some magic involved in education. There are these rare occasions when teachers and students are carried away by subject matter. This has to do with profanation. The world of the student is kept outside, and something of the world is brought in by the teacher, in a profane way, released from its context outside of school.

ROGIER ARENTS: This is how I would call it if things are brought into play. Let me introduce these magical moments into the model. I will give these the shape of a circle because they are brought into play!
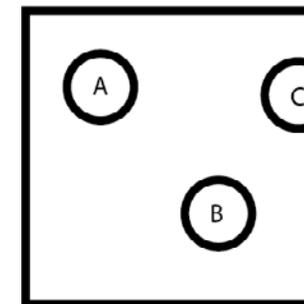
something of the world is brought into play

ACT 3
HOW DOES PLAY RELATE TO THE CONTEXT OF ARTEZ?

ROB MARTENS: When we were just talking about play in the first act, we stated that one of the core elements of play is that it is a free activity, right? How do you relate this to school? School is certainly not a freely chosen activity; it is obligated in the Netherlands until the age of 18.

ROGIER ARENTS: I've been struggling with this question for a long time. But in the context of ArtEZ and my classes, you could say that school is a freely chosen activity, in the sense that the students had a free choice to study. But like Peter Gray said: play may be a freely chosen activity, but it's not a free-form activity. The educational programme comes with a package; not every class might feel like a freely chosen subject, but in general, it is freely chosen. In the context of ArtEZ, I as a teacher can expect a certain intrinsic motivation from the students.

ROB MARTENS: And how do you make sure that your students stay intrinsically motivated? You probably give your students assignments, you tell them what to do and what not to do, and you assess them. There are many dangers of de-motivation in school, or worse, a lot of external motivation is offered, like grades and diplomas. In my book, I advocate that kids should play freely—that they'll find out themselves what motivates them the most, and through this motivation, they'll discover the world. School nowadays offers mostly external motivation, which destroys the students' intrinsic motivation for learning.

MAARTEN SIMONS: I agree there are demotivating elements in school, but this does not mean that suddenly all motivation has to come from the student. If you let a child learn only by intrinsic motivation, they will stay the 'son' or 'daughter' of the family. They will never become a student because no one will show them 'the world' in a liberated way, and they can never discover their position toward the world. In other words, the child will stay in their own bubble.

ROGIER ARENTS: I agree with Maarten that not everything has to come from intrinsic motivation; it's also the teacher's job to let the student connect with the unknown and with subjects that seem in first instance boring. On the other hand, I do agree with Rob that play, as an activity, can certainly be applied in school to create attention. We already discovered that in school and play there are underlying elements that support learning.

JAN MASSCHELEIN: I understand that you are making your own choices, Rogier, but I'd like to tell you there is another consequence of basing education on motivation. Motivation is something that only comes from the student—it's something personal. We would rather work from interest than

from motivation; interest is something that comes from outside the student. It creates a motion between the student and the subject that stirs the student to study, think, and practice.

ROGIER ARENTS: At ArtEZ I give two different classes where these different educational approaches are represented. The first class is 'Field Deepening', which is student directed. This class resembles Rob's approach: the students get to study freely, and the content is derived from their own motivation. My role as a teacher here is to support this self-study and to expand their search by using my expertise. The second class is 'Field Widening', which is teacher directed; this one relates more to Jan and Maarten's view on school. In this class, the teacher decides what the students pay attention to, which subjects they study, or which skills they develop.

THIJS WITTY: That's interesting. Which of the classes do you prefer, and which connects more to play?

ROGIER ARENTS: Both classes interest me. The student-driven education relates more to free play, and the teacher-driven education relates more to a game. For me, the teacher-driven education requests a lot more effort in the form of preparation, while the student-driven education requires more effort by the students. I don't think that one form of education is better, more playful, or more motivating than the other; they are just different approaches. The two forms of education connect with each other—both are needed by the student, in my opinion. I'm happy to give both classes. I would get bored from always delivering content, but I would also get bored from only receiving content from the students.

MAARTEN SIMONS: There is one more thing I want to warn you about regarding the approach of Rob and many other play theorists in the context of education. The foundation of their theory on intrinsic motivation is based on an individualistic approach to education. We see learning as an expansion of the ego through the accumulation of skills or of knowledge. We prefer to talk about formation rather than learning; in formation, both the self and the world are actively engaged, enabling a person to transcend their everyday experience through dedicated practice and study. It is a step outside of oneself, which can lead to a period of questioning one's identity.

ROGIER ARENTS: An identity crisis… I think I feel what you're saying. School is not just a course that makes a student learn a certain skill, but through studying the skill, the student also studies them-self in relation to that skill.

JAN MASSCHELEIN: We just want to warn you, Rogier, against school becoming entertainment. School does not have to be all fun.

ROGIER ARENTS: Thank you for the warning. I do think, though, that there is a role for play as an activity in school. Perhaps not in fostering motivation, but in generating attention. I have to be honest with you: I find your theory on the essence of school beautiful, but it also sounds idealistic. Trust me, due to the longevity of the created suspension in school—six to eight hours a day, five days a week—the created 'school reality' can feel anything but liberating. School could use some 'micro-suspensions' like playful activities to remind students of the interruption from reality that is already taking place. My goal in the practical research is to create circumstances wherein a student feels free to explore and to take risks without feeling direct consequences outside the class. To create, in a sense, a 'micro-suspension': a short-lived, liberated time and space that activates a playful mind.
I take the following interpretation of school with me in my practical research: Through suspension school creates a time/space where students are free from expectations outside of school, providing them with an opportunity to engage with the world in a liberated way. This allows the student to develop new ways of thinking and being. School becomes a context where experimentation, mistakes, and the process of learning can happen without fear of harsh judgment or direct consequences.
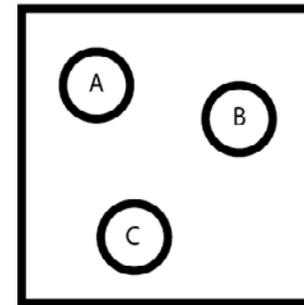
micro-suspensions that activate a playful mind
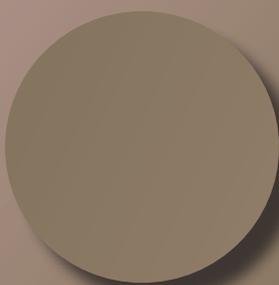
PRACTICAL RESEARCH

ART EDUCATION THROUGH THE LENS OF PLAY

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Introduction

The practical research took place in my classes at ArtEZ. I have executed and documented one questionnaire and seven experiments in which forms of play have been implemented in the class. In this chapter I describe the research context, subjects, and instruments, and I give short summaries of the experiments with an evaluation of each one. In the conclusions section I give answers to some of the research questions.

Research Context

The practical research took place at ArtEZ in Zwolle, in the Bachelor department Education in Visual Arts and Design (DBKV). The vision of the department is the belief in the essential role of visual arts and design in stimulating imagination, critical thinking, and cultural dialogue. Art and design not only provide an aesthetic experience, but are also a means for self-reflection, social change, and connection to the world around us. The department's mission is to educate passionate, vibrant, and empathetic professionals who inspire and encourage people to discover and develop their own voice within and beyond the context of education. The approach to training teachers is to ensure that they are not only able to teach, but also to inspire, innovate, and contribute to change within society. The study distinguishes itself from other teacher training programmes in the Netherlands by its design approach in education and by its artistic freedom in visual education, which is less focussed on craftsmanship and more on artistic authenticity.[1]

DBKV has three main subjects: Visual, Theory and Education. I will only describe the Visual subject since this is the subject that I teach. The subject is divided into two classes: 'Field Widening' and 'Field Deepening'. 'Field Deepening' is student-led: the student is guided by a tutor in an autonomous creative process. 'Field Widening' is teacher-led: assignments focus the student on exploration of different themes and media. In the first two years, a distinction is made between the second and third dimension; there are separate classes and teachers for 2D and 3D in the 'Field Widening' subject.

My role in the research context:
In 2021 I started working at DBKV as a tutor in the Visual subject. I was asked to join the team due to my experience in both design and fine arts. I am the only teacher in the subject with a design background. My position at DBKV is therefore to teach design in an environment that is fine-arts oriented.
In general, I share the department's vision on artistic development. My vision differs in the design approach that I represent in the Visual subject. This results in a higher degree of focus on the functional and the visual communicative

aspects of student work. I tend to give more attention to social, political, and environmental awareness and responsibility. I also give more attention to the collaborative aspect of design and art by letting students work together on projects or in activities. With this research in playful didactics came a new focal point that aided artistic and imaginative exploration. Of course, the design approach also comes with a cost: in my case, this results in a lower degree of focus on authenticity, artistic freedom, and craftsmanship.

Parameters:
Place:
The class takes place in a 60 m² classroom. It is situated in the ArtEZ Arts & Design building, in a former hospital, on the second floor in the DBKV department-wing. The classroom has windows mainly on the south side. The walls are white, and the floor is covered with thin MDF sheets to protect the real floor. The classroom contains eight 4-person tables, about twenty chairs, and a digi-board.

Time:
I give class to group A on Monday morning from 9.00 until 12.00 and to group B in the afternoon from 13.00 until 16.00. The same class is given to both groups of students, so adaptation of the experiment in group B was possible.

Materials:
A diverse mix of materials were used during the experiments; more information is to be found in the case studies.

Research Subjects

The participants of the pilot study were the first and second year students of DBKV at ArtEZ Zwolle. There are approximately 28 students per year, divided into two groups: A and B. The age ranges from 17 to 22 years old. You could roughly divide the group in three: one third comes directly from high school, one third has taken a year in between to figure out what to study and has maybe done preparatory education, and one third has done an MBO degree study in the fields of art/design. Most of the participants are female; only one out of nine students are male. Most students live within the region of Zwolle, and most of them travel by public transport. All classes are in Dutch. On average only one student per class has a migratory background.

Research instruments

I utilised the 'Playful Participatory Research' method, which I found in the book *A Pedagogy of Play: Supporting Playful Learning in Classrooms and School*. The method follows five steps for creating an educational experiment: Wonder, Plan, Play, Reflect, and Share. To extend the step 'Reflect', I introduced the 'Gibbs Reflective Cycle' in combination with the tool 'The good, the Bad and the Ugly', which I found in the book *Ludodidactics*. To avoid miscommunication, I have changed the name of the step 'Play' to 'Experiment'. Additionally, I have excluded the step 'Share' since the results of experiments are not shared individually but collectively in this thesis.

The steps that I used in my research method were therefore:
Wonder - Plan - Experiment - Document - Reflect

Analytical instruments:
I used the 'Gibb's Reflective Cycle' as an analytical instrument. The reflective cycle goes through six stages as listed below. Especially the step 'Feeling' contributed a lot to my reflective process.

Gibb's Reflective Cycle[2]:
1. Description of the experience
2. Feelings and thoughts about the experience
3. Evaluation of the experience, both good and bad
4. Analysis to make sense of the situation
5. Conclusion about what you learned and what you could have done differently
6. Action plan for how you would deal with similar situations in the future, or general changes you might find appropriate.

2. https://reflection.ed.ac.uk/reflectors-toolkit/reflecting-on-experience/gibbs-reflective-cycle

Experiment 1

We Have to Play by Rob Martens brought to me a wider conception of the term play; for example, being a spectator or listener can be seen as a form of play, albeit it a passive one.

This experiment took place in the first week of semester one with students from the first year. It was time to introduce ourselves to each other. I'm not a fan of formal introduction rounds, so I wanted to challenge the mundane and try out how I could combine an art assignment and an ice-breaking exercise in a playful way.

I asked students to tell a story about their summer holiday while other students were making drawings based on that story. The students brought pastel crayons, charcoal, and A2-size paper to the class. The goal was to draw freely, more like doodling along with the story. For each story there was a time limit of five minutes. At the start the students were free to decide how to draw, but along the way I challenged them with prompts. The prompts requested the students to draw with their wrong hand, to draw as ugly as possible, to draw abstractly, to draw big, and to draw small. The instructions were meant to break with expectation and to avoid judgement of the result of the drawing. Based on the sketches made in class, the students were requested to make a larger and more elaborate drawing that combined parts from the sketches into a new narrative. Storytelling can be seen here as the

main implemented form of play. Secondly, the role of the listener is positioned as a form of play. Thirdly, the act of drawing from imagination can be considered playful. I realised that these are all forms of play that actually closely relate to regular forms of scholastic techniques.

Generally, the response of the students was positive. Many students liked listening and drawing at the same time. Some students mentioned they found it challenging to tell a story of five minutes. I reassured them by saying that it didn't matter if the story was shorter or maybe even boring. Short and/or boring stories leave a lot of space for the drawer's imagination. Other students were challenged by the drawing instructions; they had difficulties letting go of their aesthetic idea of the drawing.

The first experiment worked out well. In my opinion, we learned more about each other through stories than through a conventional introduction. I was happy that it was combined with a creative drawing exercise. I learned that storytelling and listening can be playful ways to spark imagination and creativity.

What I could improve is to reflect on the created drawings before going to the stage of working out a bigger one. I also still had to get used to documenting the experiment through photography. Overall, experiment 1 was a good start of the research.

Students are drawing while listening to a story of one's holiday.

Resulting drawings from a student

Role as teacher - guarding the bags?

Experiment 2

In the book *In Defence of the School*, the authors Masschelein and Simons introduce the term 'profanation' as a scholastic feature. With this term the authors describe how the teacher brings 'the world' (in the form of a subject or skill) to the students in class. It's done in a particular way so that it's liberated from its use in the world and made free for the student to interpret or to decide what to take from it. In this way, they say, you bring a subject or object into play.

While setting up this experiment I was still figuring out what the authors actually mean with profanation. A way to figure this out was to try it out in practice. In this experiment I actually didn't bring 'the world into the class' but 'the class into the world' by going to a museum and a park. The experiment took place in the second week of semester one with students from the first year.

In preparation for the class, I asked the students to visit the exhibition *Northern Light*, about nature photography, at Museum de Fundatie in

Zwolle. I asked the students to select their favourite artwork in this exhibition, take a picture of it, and bring it to the next class. Also, I asked them to think about why this work spoke to them.

The class took place in a park along the river IJssel on the outskirts of Zwolle. First, we discussed the overall experience of the exhibition. Then I asked every student to show the artwork that they'd selected and to motivate their choice. After this I gave the assignment to make a series of three photographs in the surrounding area, inspired by the selected artworks from the museum. I advised them to explore the possibilities of the camera, and I told them that all types of photo editing were allowed, but the process had to be transparent.

It was nice to notice that this experiment was met with a lot of enthusiasm. Going outside the school building created many connections within the group. They went in small groups to the museum and in small groups to the park. During the photography assignment in the park many students helped each other. All this was not planned, but it had an unintended benefit. I also noticed that the change of location made students act differently. Some students, for example, asked whether they could quit earlier, while this rarely happened in the classroom.

I learned that organising a field trip breaks the routine of the school. It therefore creates a suspension from

the school-reality. At the same time, it is a very literal form of profanation, of making something available: the museum, the park, and photography. Attention is directed in the form of a location visit, an introduction, a photography assignment, and feedback talks.

I positioned myself at the meeting point from where the students departed. Students left their bags there, which resulted in me becoming the guard of the bags. I would have preferred to walk through the park and see the students in action. What worked well about being at the meeting point was that students could come to me to show their work and ask for advice.

Experiment 3

In the book *In Defence of the School*, Masschelein and Simons write that scholastic techniques have a relation with games: that scholastic techniques bring subject matter and students into play. I started to see this too, but I thought that the playfulness of scholastic techniques could be enhanced to improve the quality of the experience.

I was wondering how I could activate students in a peer evaluation. This made me think of turning an evaluation session into a role play activity. When students get assigned a specific role and task, they might feel the authority to perform an evaluation on another student.

This experiment took place in the third week of semester one with the first-year students. By coincidence, I had two evaluations in a row. The first in a traditional teacher-led form that was focussed on the drawings from experiment 1. The second, an experiment in a role-play format, on the work from the photography class described in experiment 2. In both evaluations my idea was to look at their work from the perspective of the image aspect. I have to say that I didn't mention the image aspects when I gave both assignments, so it was actually not right to evaluate their work from this perspective.

For the role-play evaluation students made a series of three pictures and were asked to print them out and place them on the table. I introduced the role play by initiating a fictive competition with juries. The students were divided into four groups of three people. Each group represented a jury on a specific image aspect. The groups received a printed text about the image aspect of their category and got some time to study and discuss the image aspect. The juries went along the work of the students and picked the best single photograph and the best photograph series in their category. Then the juries motivated their selections to the group.

The difference between the two evaluations was stunning. In the traditional form, the students hardly dared to speak up. The students were surprised by the introduction of the image aspects, as they rightfully expected that we would look at the drawing from the perspective of narrative. The role play version of the evaluation was very relaxed, and it was met with joy and enthusiasm. The format made the students comfortable to speak and they could show their reflection abilities very well.

I learned from this experiment that it's very important to be clear about the focus of the evaluation, which also has to match the focus of the assignment. I also learned that by giving clear roles to students you can give them agency to perform their task.

Students review the photo-series

Students motivate their selection

Home-style printing with a spoon

Print session in the graphic workshop

Students reviewing their print results

Experiment 4

In *Ludodidactics*, Renger & Hoogendoorn promote the use of games as a didactic format. In their book they present a structure based on 'Design Thinking' to design games for educational purposes. In this experiment I was curious if I could make a card game with students in order to get to know each other better. This experiment took place in weeks four through six of semester one with first-year students.

The idea was to create a game of quartets together with the class. Each student made three cards in which they revealed their personal characteristics. The cards were made with lino-cut technique. The students worked on the cards in the graphic workshop, in the classroom, and at home.

The reaction to the given assignment was very positive: the students liked the idea of playing with each other and getting to know things about each other. One student mentioned, for example, that he wanted to play the game during their Berlin trip in October.

While the students were enthusiastic, I'm more critical towards this experiment because it took a lot of effort from me, and because I made a lot of decisions for the students regarding the format and design of the game. The creative freedom of the assignment was therefore too limited, in my opinion.

I learned that the aspect of making something together with the whole class motivates students. The outcome could have been better if I had involved the students in the design of the game. I think it would have given the students more agency and therefore also made them feel more ownership over the complete project. Now, I have the impression that the students only felt ownership over their own three cards. Therefore, in the end, the whole game didn't come together and was, for example, not played during their trip in Berlin.

Print session in the classroom

In experiment 5

While I was preparing a class about Johannes Itten's colour theory, I got the tip to have a look at Itten's classes at Bauhaus. Inspired by the cult of Mazdaznan, he introduced gymnastics, breathing exercises, and wellness practices into his classes.[3]

This led me to the idea of doing some physical exercise in the class. My intention wasn't to establish a spiritual connection but to create an unexpected moment of relaxation and activation–to bridge the theoretical and practical part of the class. Such a short activity could possibly act as a suspension from the school reality: a little break-out that would remind the student of the actual suspension that already happens at school.

The experiment took place in week ten of semester one with the first-year students. It was a group activity that was based on warming-up and cooling-down exercises in sports. The class started with an introduction to Johannes Itten and his colour theory, and I explained the painting exercise that we would do after. Just before we started the practical part of the class I mentioned that Johannes Itten always started his class with physical and breathing exercises. I asked the students to stand up and participate in this exercise.

When I asked students what they thought of the exercise they responded positively. I heard in their responses that it was nice to do some physical exercise, that it was actually a nice alteration to the class, and that it was relaxing. One student mentioned she got some pain in her neck due to the exercise, though.

Milena, my peer at MEiA who was visiting the class, saw something that she found playful in the exercise because there was a sudden change in activity–something surprising that came with a lot of laughter and fun.

The experiment was very short in contrast to the others; it just took five minutes. It was interesting to find out that such a small experiment can already deliver many insights. An exercise that is very normal in a gym or sports context is suddenly very funny and also exciting in a classroom. It changed the atmosphere in the class from serious to exciting and joyful. I learned that such a small experiment can have quite a big impact on the class. I saw a lot of potential for doing more of these kinds of small experiments.

3. https://uw.pressbooks.pub/honors211artbook/chapter/sarah-crumrine/

Warming-up exercise

Follow-up assignment – colour field paintings

Theoretical part of the class

Experiment 6

In this experiment I built further on experiment 5, in a way that the play activity was short and stood out from the given assignments. In this way I shifted my focus to creating a playful environment or mentality rather than creating a playful assignment itself.

This experiment took place in week two of semester two with the second-year students. I explicitly mentioned that this was an experiment and a playful activity; I hoped that this would make students feel more free about it.

The group was divided into two groups of seven students. I challenged them to think about how they could move together as one organism that navigates through the space in a particular way. There were in total four groups that did the exercise, and they all came up with movements that represented animals: a spider with one missing leg, a centipede, a snake, and a caterpillar. In this class, we focussed on engagement with each other as makers. The following assignment in the class was to create an artwork or performance together with the whole class.

The exercise was met with a lot of laughter and fun. The response from the students was positive. Multiple students mentioned that it was on the edge, or just over the edge, of their comfort zone. But they said they were challenged in a positive way. What could be improved is to do the

exercise in the classroom, and not in the hallway, so that it would be more intimate and there would be fewer external spectators.

This experiment was definitely a playful activity; it was also very visible that it was a playful activity. There was a lot of laughter, social contact, and physical contact. The experiment worked out to set a kind of mentality in the classroom, and it had a positive resonance in the class after the exercise. It also created a connection between the students. Next time I would like to play along myself.

Students enacting a caterpillar

Students enacting a snake

Students enacting a spider with one missing leg

Student presenting her drawing to the group

Close-up of a drawing on newspaper

Student presenting her drawing to the group

Experiment 7

In one of the MEiA classes, Sjoerd let us doodle on a newspaper from that day. I recognised it as a playful activity because it reconnected me with something that I would do in my childhood. I was curious to do this exercise in week three of semester two with the second-year students. The exercise fitted well within the theme 'engagement', as in engaging with contemporary issues. And I was curious if my students would also see this as a playful activity.

I brought a newspaper to the class and instructed the students to take a page from the newspaper and react to it with a felt marker. I told them they could respond as they wished, maybe by reading the newspaper, or just seeing it as plain paper to draw on. After 15 minutes, every student presented their page to the group.

Most students were eager to participate. The threshold was not so high, so it was nothing out of their comfort zone. The students were working quietly and concentratedly. The results were quite diverse in approach: some were more focussed on text and others more on the images.

The students were enthusiastic about the workshop. They definitely saw it as being playful. The experiment was well introduced and well structured. Still, there was a lot of freedom for the students to do the exercise in their own way. It created space to play, test, and fool around. Doing such an activity in the class works out well; I think it sets the tone of a playful approach to making.

A note on copying in education: In a MEiA class we once discussed the nature of copying in education. What I took from this conversation is that copying in education is ethically right because the main goal is didactics and not the uniqueness of a tutor. But it's appropriate to credit the person who inspired you, which I did in this experiment.

One of the drawings on newspaper

Defining play by the players

After half a year of practical and theoretical research, I tried to figure out how the students—the players in my experiments—actually relate to play in their practice as designers / artists and educators. I wanted to ask the students through a questionnaire.

In the book *Ambiguity of Play*, I found the following definition of play by child players: "The definitions of play given by child players themselves generally centre on having fun, being outdoors, being with friends, choosing freely, not working, pretending, enacting, fantasy and drama, and playing games".[1]

Questionnaire with students:
The questionnaire was given to 27 second-year students from the full-time studies and to 15 first-year students from the part-time studies. The part-time students are older (±22-50 years old) and often have practical experience in (art) education. The questionnaire was given in the first class of semester two, so the students had not yet experienced any of my earlier experiments, and they were not aware of my vision on play.

The Question:
Do you recognise a form of play, or of playing, in your design / artistic / teaching activities? If yes, please describe.

Almost all students had a positive reaction to the question; the descriptions were very diverse.

In relation to design / artistic activities:
The relationship with play is often made with processes like: experiments, research, discovering, wondering, testing, developing. And the play is happening with colour, image, texture, text, chance, ideas, laws, rules, frameworks, image aspects.

In relation to teaching activities:
The following terms were used in descriptions: game techniques, work forms and assignments, game elements, jokes, simulation games, and improvisation.
The following goals were mentioned: warming up, freeing up, energiser, loosening up, letting go, varying, encouraging play, sensing, light-hearted atmosphere, dynamic, being busy, and chance.

Conclusions on Sub-questions

How can play be implement in the classroom?
I experimented with play in the form of assignments and exercises, and as an evaluation session. What worked particularly well were the exercises and the evaluation session. The experiments in the form of an assignment were met with a more serious and careful approach. This might be because the assignment would be assessed later on. I started to notice that it had a positive effect when I announced clearly that I was doing an experiment; therefore, it became more transparent for the students, and they were better able to understand the underlying reason. I felt that when we did an exercise that was shorter in time and more detached from the assignment, students felt more freedom to play. The benefit of this approach was that these exercises were met with more joy, and it had a profound effect on the atmosphere in the classroom. My assumption is that this approach has a positive effect on the mindset during the following assignments in the class. I have the idea that the playfulness of the workout can positively influence the conditions of studying throughout assignments because of a certain playful atmosphere it sets.
Surprisingly interesting was the experiment with evaluation based on role play. This experiment gave a lot of agency to the students; this was because of the use of role play and a well-structured format that was given.

What seems to be important is that it is distanced from the normal and has a clearly defined structure:
- Suspension: definition in time and place separated from the rest of the class;
- Challenging the mundane: it should be different from the norm;
- Clear roles for the students and teacher;
- Clear instructions for the students;
- Instructions and roles leave room for interpretation and creativity; they should actually spark it.

What types of play are suitable at school?
In the experiments, several forms of play were implemented, such as storytelling, role play, exploration, competition, game design, physical exercise, social play, and doodling. Role play was one of my favourites to work with, but there are many more forms of play that can be used. I discovered that many scholastic techniques already have forms of play built into them. For example, a student presentation bears a form of role play where the student temporarily takes on a similar role as a teacher.

4. By King, 1979; Kaarby, 1986; Ambiguity of Play p.49

What challenges are met when play is integrated in class?
There were several challenges that I met while integrating play in the class, of which:

Documentation:
In the documentation through photography, it was not always visible whether students were playing or not–even though I was often convinced myself that they were at play, and they mentioned this themselves as well. I can conclude from this that play is not always visible in the facial or bodily expressions of students.

Inspiration:
I had expected that drawing inspiration from play would lead to a lot of ideas for experiments in classes. In a way it did that, but not as easily as I expected. Doing the experiments in class gave me a lot of extra work. I wonder if this was because the experiments were part of this research, and in that way, added extra tension to the experiments.

Creating conditions for play:
Creating the right conditions for play was not necessarily a challenge but more of a learning curve. I think I slowly got better at it during the research, both by experimentation and through theoretical research. There is still a lot to learn, but through this research, I opened an interesting 'box of opportunities' to work further with.

Conflict of play and assessment:
Through theoretical research I came across a conflict between play and assessment. By reading *We Have to Play*, I became convinced that too much focus on assessment can break the conditions for play. This made me take a less active role in formative assessment during the semester and instead work more with peer-feedback structures. But this led to some ethically troubling feelings on my side during the work review with summative assessment at the end of the semester. Looking back on this, I think I relied too much on peer feedback for the first-year students.
The last semester I followed the course Basic Qualification in Assessment (BKE), which gave me more insight into the roles of assessment in art education.
The course revealed to me the 'Test Cycle': a framework that emphasises the importance of transparent learning goals and of criteria that lead to an objective assessment for learning and of learning. This framework reminded me of a game where there are clear goals, rules, and roles. Because of this transparency, all players can check on the fairness of the game.
Through this BKE course I came to see assessment in art education more as part of the structure that creates suspension, profanation, and attention. Being

a student at MEiA, I noticed that clear structures and communication about assessment motivated and challenged me to study. For example, the abilities that form the basis for the final assessment made me reflect on the educational process from a wider perspective (like this reflection on play and assessment). When I reflect now on the dilemma I found in assessment and play, I would say that assessment actually creates conditions for play, as in a game-like situation. Experiments 1, 2 and 4 were part of this game because the results were being summatively assessed. Experiment 3 was a formative assessment. Experiments 5 through 7 took place outside of the assessed part of the class and could therefore more relate to free play.

Challenging the comfortable:
Especially during the first year of MEiA, the tutors put a lot of effort into creating a safe space to study: a safe space so everybody felt comfortable to be oneself. This was in one way very interesting for me; it allowed me to show the playful side of myself. On the other hand, it annoyed me that often the focus was on making everybody comfortable through introducing all types of 'check-ins', like meditation, that I was not always comfortable with. The thing is, I don't mind being uncomfortable during an exercise, as long as I feel generally secure enough to step over certain boundaries.
I think as a teacher you have to make a balancing act here. Firstly, you have to create a safe place for everyone to dare to show themselves and feel comfortable. A part of this can be achieved by creating a mundane environment where everything is as expected and as agreed on with each other. Also, by creating enough personal contact between students and teachers, thereby building on a trusting relationship. Secondly, the teacher has to challenge the mundane to create a learning environment. There has to be something uncertain to learn something new. Learning happens outside of the comfort zone. This means there is always some form of discomfort from the students, and everyone is triggered by other insecurities. Teaching is about balancing how much the group or individual students can be challenged, and about building in an escape, so you can step out of the challenge at any time when it becomes too much.

A meta level of studies:
Being enrolled in a Master of Education in Arts while teaching at a Bachelor of Education in Arts, I felt like doing some meta studies. Even the topic that I chose, playful didactics, is something that my students are learning in their education classes. Students in the second year were interested in my way of working and were curious to hear the insights I gained through my research. Therefore, it was interesting to do the experiments and reflections with the students; I felt we could both learn from them. I started to make the experiments more transparent, in the sense that I would announce the experiments more clearly. For students, it also became more clear when I was in the role of

the teacher and when I was in the role of the researcher. The evaluation of an experiment became something meaningful for both the students and me. It helped to openly talk with students about the content and the way education took place in the class. In this way, we created an educational playground for both students and teacher.
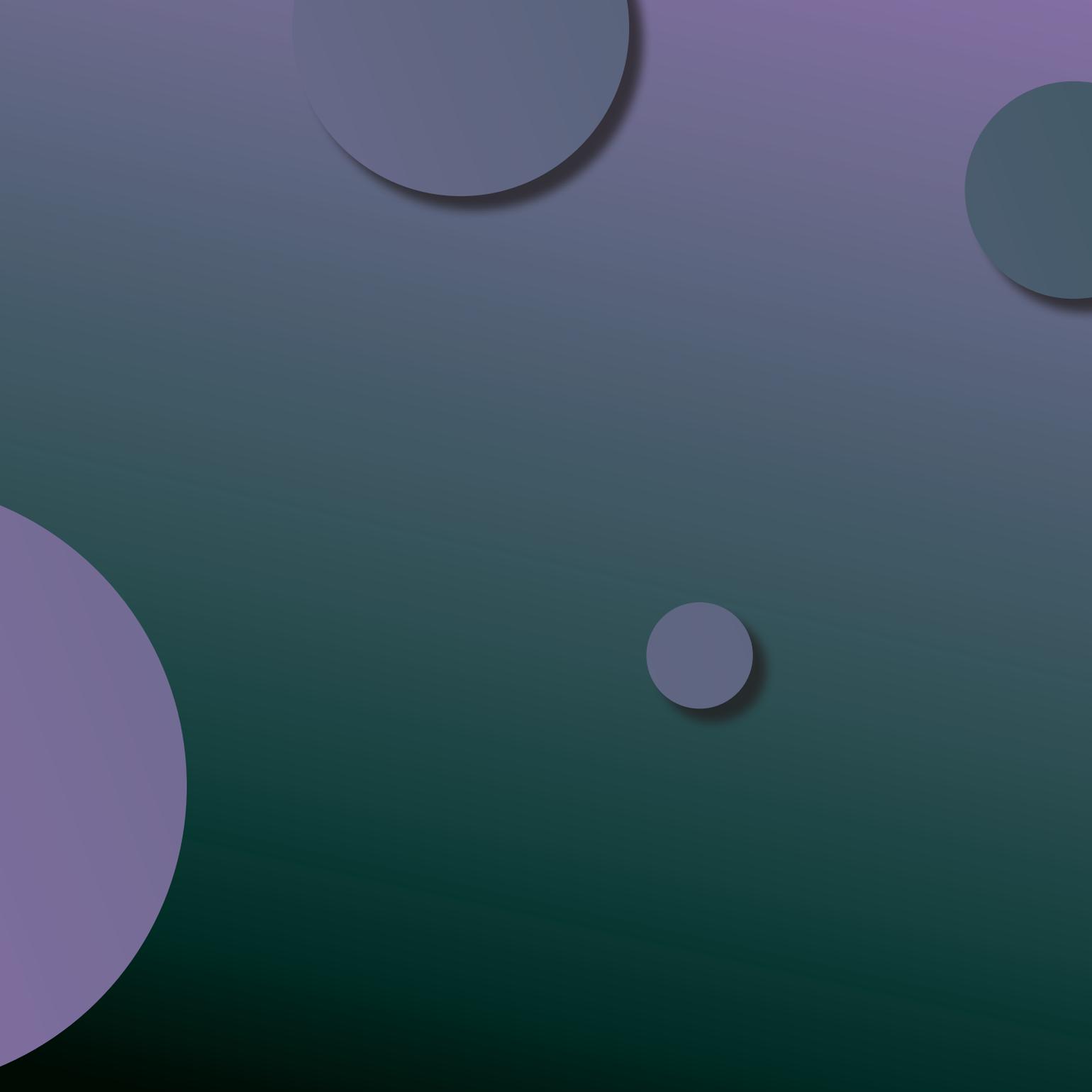
EPILOGUE

ART EDUCATION THROUGH THE LENS OF PLAY

Rogier Arents   Master Education in Arts   Piet Zwart Institute

Researcher in role-play session at MEiA

Main Conclusion

Alright, let's head to answer the main research question: Are you ready? Ah, just to remind or inform you, the question is: How can play be applied to build a pleasant and creative study environment in a Bachelor-level art and design class? The answer that I found is quite simple: by creating conditions that allow for playfulness in the classroom, both for the students and for the tutor. I found ways to create playful conditions through the theoretical and practical research in the concepts of school and play. What seemed at first to be contradictory concepts—play and school—appeared to have much in common. In fact, they might even have a common foundation in creating conditions for a learning environment. This foundation allows a student or player to enter an alternate reality that supports freedom to explore and fail, without consequences outside that reality, and that draws attention to something in particular.

What worked best was to create short, playful activities that were also announced as such, and therefore were slightly suspended from the rest of the class. Within the activity, there was a surprising or challenging element—something that stood out from the norm and drew attention. The roles, goals, and instructions for the activity had to be as clear as possible and had to allow for a built-in freedom. Finally, there had to be an escape that guaranteed the student that it can always stop the activity.

A playful activity awakens a playful mind that can find its way to the rest of the lesson. A playful mind is a mind wherein creativity thrives, where new connections and new ideas can be made: a perfect mindset for studying.

The above description for a playful activity is what the research directed me to and what worked best for me in my educational context. There might be many recipes for playful activities in education, certainly because of the situational aspect of education and the ambiguity of play.

Reflections

In addition to finding answers to my research questions, the master's programme and research made it possible for me to grow as a teacher and researcher. Through developing a research mentality in education, I opened up ways to reveal the playful side of myself in the classroom. It gave me a certain feeling of freedom that led to a more confident, open, but also critical approach in education.

As always, every answer to a question raises new questions. Some of the new questions that have arisen for me are:

Does a playful didactic really increases creativity?

I don't think it's a coincidence that I was curious about playful didactics in the context of the arts. I see an interesting relation between playfulness and creativity; I'm pretty sure that creativity thrives in a playful environment. Perhaps creativity is a form of play? This research focused on the relation between play and education and left creativity out on purpose to keep a certain focus. The relation between play and creativity is something that I became very curious about studying further.

What would happen if I participate in the play activities together with the students?

This is a next step that I would like to try out in class. I'm curious what it does with the teacher-student relationship. Does it make it more open and trusting? Do you lose your authority as a tutor? Or does it break the spell of the game when there is an unequal power in the play?

Are you having a small identity crisis?

As Masschelein and Simons describe, education is not about learning, which is an expansion of the existing self, but about formation, where the self gets shaped by means of practice and study. This results, as they say, in a small identity crisis. And this is somewhat how I feel at the end of this master's programme. I am still in a process of repositioning myself in relation to education, research, and my practice as a designer and artist. After doing my bachelor's degree at Design Academy Eindhoven, I positioned myself as an artistic visual communicator in relation to knowledge production. During this master's programme, I also started to see myself as a theoretical and practical researcher. I'm curious to further explore this new role in both my art & design practice and in education. Within education, for example, I would be interested in becoming more active in the development of art education.

A Word of Thanks

I would like to give thanks to my partner, Asnate, for providing me the support and space to start and finish the master's programme; to my daughter, Tilda, for her playful inspiration; to my peers at MEiA: Ronald, Madelief, Kanna, Marjolein, Floor, Amira, Aoife, Constança, Cindy, Marie, Tatiana, Pamela, Jochem, and super-peer Milena who provided a great learning community; to my tutors: Sjoerd, Irina, Thijs, Lizzy, Renée, Çaglar, Marek, Kate, and all the guest-speakers; to the MEiA staff: Susana, Yasmine, and Ingrid. Amanda for proofreading and editing. And last but not least, to all my students and colleagues at ArtEZ for allowing me to experiment and document.

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