

Playfulness!: Full of Play In and Out of the Classroom

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Each year since 1989, members of our Music EdVentures group, have gathered in the spring to re-connect ourselves, to be rejuvenated by our friends, to get re-inspired to be better teachers, and to rejoice in the wildly hilarious, spontaneous laughter that seems to be a staple of our organization and our lives. I do think we are “full of it”. . . full of play, that is!

What comes to mind immediately when I think of hilarity is the banquet of 2008; I still don't quite know what was in the air that night, but something spurred those of us who would not normally get up and do something entertaining, to join in the “show” and do our bit to participate in the “entertainment.” It was such good, clean, innocent, hilarious fun. I laughed so hard, so constantly that night that I didn't want the evening to end. As we were walking out of the room, Judy Fjell and I looked at each other and burst out laughing (those low, full-bodied, belly laughs!). Then, she took a breath and asked with wonder on her face, “What just happened in there?”

My Introduction to Playful Teaching and Living

When I first “got connected” to this playful way of living and teaching, it was 1971 and I took a course in Fort Wayne, Indiana called Education Through Music. Mary Helen Richards and Fleurette Sweeney were the main teachers of the course, and I had so much fun that I knew THIS would be my teaching self, although I hadn't even taught yet. I had never experienced such playfulness and easy humor with children and with peers. At the time, the playfulness was most often situated in a “song-experience-game,” labeled that to emphasize the wealth of experiences (social, musical, movement, and linguistic) present in the play, experiences beyond the singing of the song and the process of the game.

I was so smitten by the philosophy, practices, and people of Education Through Music (ETM) that I could not imagine myself NOT attending every course, workshop, or gathering that I could. And, I hardly missed anything (first as an apprentice, then on the faculty). . . .for the next 20 years (except the Minnesota summer course of 1978 when I was in Texas beginning my doctorate). As I mentioned earlier, we had wildly hilarious times as we drove, ate, planned, taught, talked, traveled, and told stories. As I write this, I see Mary Helen with mouth wide open, shoulders hunched, eyes a-sparkle, and full-out serendipitous laughter.

Some of us have played the singing games with such abandon that we got injured in the process. My first year of teaching in Indiana, I was outdoors with a Grade Four class playing Frog's in the Meadow, and as I raced around the circle, I stepped in a hole, fell down, and seriously sprained my ankle . . . this left me on crutches for a few days. Also in the midst of a chase game, Betty Hoffmann was racing around her Grade Three class in Montana, took a slide on the tile floor, fell flat on her back, tore some cartilage, and seriously bruised her sternum; she was out of commission for quite a while. In a Kindergarten class in Ontario, I was teaching When I Was One as a leapfrog game. I was tucked up on the floor, but when one little guy jumped over me, he pushed his hands down on my head in order to jump over me, knocking my nose into the tile floor. The class had to be suspended while we tried to get my nose to stop bleeding!

The Outliers

Not everyone who took our courses or encountered us singing and playing in airports, restaurants, and public places were equally enamored with our sense of play. I remember that a few teachers over the years would

groan, “All we do is play games, I need to learn how to teach music!” Some diners looked at us with annoyance when our restaurant noise-level and singing audibly trumped their conversations and images of a nice quiet meal with their loved ones. Some airport travelers (in the old days, we could wait for and greet people at the gate) seemed to think we were a particularly avid religious group, as we would “sing in” an arriving friend when she exited the plane. So, these outliers, especially *those in our courses*, got my attention, and I began trying to figure out the distinctions between play-infused teaching (playfulness) and playing games.

During our talks over the years, Anna Langness would often confess that a relatively small proportion of her elementary music classes were devoted to “playing games.” Instead, Anna was intent upon developing skills and understandings that gave students a springboard to a lifetime of musical satisfaction and skillfulness. So her study activities were designed to be fun, engaging, stimulating, and game-like, but they did not necessarily warrant playing singing games for most of the class period.

Likewise, my university students (undergraduate and graduate) needed the intellectual stimulation that comes from being challenged with cognitive, analytical discourse about our music making and methods-learning. Too much game playing without enough “learning about learning” led some of these adults to be skeptical about the academic rigor component of my college classes.

Thinking about these and similar contexts caused me several years ago to adopt the term “playfulness” to describe the style and intent for interacting with learners. When we present study activities and information, playfulness can be, but is not *necessarily* a game.

Playfulness Without a Game

Some of us have struggled with the notion that “Okay, the game (fun) is over, now it’s time to be serious and study.” Twenty years ago, I tried to address the concern “What do we do besides play games?” in an article in the ETM Newsletter called “We’ve Had a Good Time Playing the Game: Now What?”

Ideas about the content and implementation of the “Now What?” question, led Doug Bartholomew and me to write two books that have playfulness threaded throughout the pages and activities: *SongWorks 1: Singing in the Education of Children* (1997, Wadsworth) and *SongWorks 2: Singing from Sound to Symbol* (1999, Wadsworth).

Introducing children to sound study, musical terms, historical contexts, skill practice, compositional techniques, and notation of sound is part of a comprehensive music program, but these facets of the program are likely not taught while playing a singing game. These “now what?” activities, however, can be taught with the charm, playfulness, and imaginative interaction that are so characteristic of our folksong games.

Even when we teach in “lecture mode” or “presentation mode,” we can infuse our teaching presence with a playfulness that connects us to our learners, no matter how many there are, no matter what age they are. Here are five ideas for doing that:

1. Look at learners as if you know and like them, with soft eyes and lingering eye contact
2. Plan brief acknowledgments of the presence of your learners by using their names (#1 behavior is important here), even if you do not ask them anything: Ex: “Now, in Stacy’s class she may never encounter this, but in Tammy’s class, she may have the opposite experience.” “Jess, you look a little unsure of this idea. Let me give an example.”
3. Use light humor to show your own light, humorous side (see #1): “Stan, I wonder if, at any time in your long, wonderful life, you got to be the Cheese!” “Just in case, I went into babble-mode when I explained that, could you explain to me what I just tried to explain to you?”

4. Teach as if you are having a conversation with your learners (see #1): “My gosh, Molly, your image is sure vivid for me!” “Josh, how does that explanation compare with your music study?” Rhetorical questions, those not needing a verbal response, can be good ways to accomplish #2, #3, and #4. Again, being conversational can lead us to pose our ideas as if we are asking, “I wonder if this has ever happened to you?” “When you do this, what happens?” In these ways, our teaching is playful by being highly interactive with our learners, no matter their age or number.
5. Be aware of the balance between *your* talking and *their* doing. Teaching never needs to be one or the other (I teach in universities, remember? We have *all* learned from good lectures!), and ideally, it is a balance between the two. Sprinkle your talking with #1, 2, 3, and 4 and sprinkle your interactions with light-hearted, yet meaningful playfulness.

Playfulness with Mother Goose

My most recent project with playfulness involved developing ways to play with young children and nursery rhymes. Developed over the past 10 years at Oberlin, the nursery rhyme play grew from my desire to introduce the three-, four-, and five-year-old children and their parents in the MusicPlay program (I teach two sections of 12 children once a week for 12 weeks) to the charming, lilting language and stories of Mother Goose rhymes.

Published in February 2010 by Alfred Publishing, *RhymePlay: Playing with Children and Mother Goose* is the result of my attempts at playfulness and rhyming. Each of the 16 rhymes included in the book has four components to lead the teachers, parents, and early childhood caregivers in playing with their children: FingerPlays, Playlets, Story-Making, and ReadingPlay. The book also features a Glossary of Terms, 10 Ways to Make RhymePlay Playful, FAQs for the Author, and reproducible picture cards for reading ideographs. So, if you are interested in exploring some of this playfulness with children, see the promotion information on the next page for ordering details.

None of the activities in RhymePlay is a “game” in the conventional sense, but I hope they are all playful. My ideal image for using rhymeplays is parents, teachers, and caregivers exchanging giggles and surprises and playlets and story-making with children as the rhymes “come alive” for both tall ones and small ones. Let me know if that happens for you, okay?

