Watch Sesame Street video to start.

Play is a fundamental component of all cultures and time periods. Play based learning is an informal approach which promotes play and story session as the primary media for learning, offers children choices and alternative activities to encourage children’s independence in learning, and advocates a balance between child-initiated activities and teacher/practitioner guidance.

Play based learning offers a broad and relevant learning experience in an integrated manner, allows for exploratory learning in an active manner, enables social and emotional development, and also empowers the student to be an autonomous independent learner. Also, students are able to learn about culture, explore their creativity, build their language skills or vocabulary, as well as fosters adaptability, understanding, and collaboration.

Let’s have a look at this video (Importance of play based learning – Rowan University) to better understand the importance of play based learning. [VIDEO].

Through our readings and research, we aimed to create a way to better understand play based learning while adapting it to a K-8 environment. In this, we will be exploring play as learning through the lenses of art, music, dance, and drama; using popular culture.

Art is symbolic of visual representation of learning; be it showing an expression, thought, emotion, or idea. Drama is symbolic of expression through use of the body, props, and or voice. Dance is symbolic of the use of movement to demonstrate an emotion, thought, or idea; while music is an expression or understanding made through the use of instrumentals and or voice.

Let us have a look at this video (Take the lead – Tango scene) to see what ways dance may be used as learning. [Video]. In this video, dance was used as a hook. Which can be used across any grade. For those of us who might not be familiar with this movie, it is called Take the Lead, and it is about an inner city dance teacher who experienced how lack of cultural understanding was affecting his neighbourhood and decided to do something about it. He began volunteering at his local high school, teaching a group of at-risk youth what he knew – Dance. At first they were disengaged, but after that clip you saw, they were all “on-board” and ready to learn. Through dance he was able to teach them social competence, emotional development, respect (both for self and others), dignity, cross-cultural understanding, leading, following, questioning, adaptability, acceptance, accountability, and ultimately academic success – just to name a few. This movie is actually an adaptation of a real life story.

Just as we see through dance, art is also another medium of play which can be used. Play based learning allows us to think, feel, explore, and imagine. Across all grades, across all subjects, art can be used as a mode of expression for understanding, questioning, or reflection. Students are able to show their ideas using a different medium, and also see a visual representation of the ideas of others as well. So across all grades, what are some of the benefits of learning? Click on the padlet link below to share some of your thoughts on the benefits of play as learning.

Play develops the brain - it is believed that play shapes the structural design of the brain. We know that secure attachments and stimulation are significant aspects of brain development; play provides active exploration that assists in building and strengthening brain pathways. Play creates a brain that has increased ‘flexibility and improved potential for learning later in life’ (Lester & Russell, 2008, p. 9).

Play builds social competence and interpersonal skills - voluntary-play is freely chosen. However, players can also be invited or prompted to play. Through play, children are able to make connections with others, develop friendships and regulate their behaviours.

Play provides other avenues of achievement or success for students who might not be so successful in other areas. Play provides a value for perseverance and collaboration, and these are an essential part of life which allows for holistic learning. As play includes frustrations, challenges, and fears – encountered in a fun, non-threatening environment, and students are encouraged to take risks in accomplishing their tasks.

Play is often self-driven thus building intrinsic motivations to accomplish tasks and through all this, according to Cornett & Smithrim (2001), a positive relationship is built between play and academic success. “The history of the human species is rooted and told across all cultures through its stories, art, drama, and music” (Cornett & Smithrim, 2001. p. 4).

A popular example that can be used is the show Glee; Students exploring growth, academic achievement, exploring life issues, as well as social issues through song, dance, art, and drama. Sone issues that were explored are the issue of identity, homosexuality, family environment, adaptability, academic success, death, decision making.

Some learning theories that support play based learning are Vygotsky’s Social Development: Zone of Proximal Development – which looks at Social interactions through play act as a catalyst for intellectual growth; This enables students to approach problem-solving creatively. Vygotsky emphasized that teachers or educators must act as a guide for students however, to guide them from where they are and what they know, to the next stage or next level of understanding that is desired.

Piaget’s stages of Cognitive Development –believed that children learn using the 5 senses; touch, sight, hear, taste, smell, as well as through movement, and interacting with others. As they gather information using these senses, they store them as schema; which to later pull from and build understanding regarding life from.

Gardner’s multiple intelligences: There are seven multiple intelligences which each and every learner utilizes. No one person has one fixed intelligence, but each individual embodies all 7 intelligences used to varying degrees. The multiple intelligences include Verbal (Word lovers), Visual (Images), Musical (Music lovers), Interpersonal (extroverted), Intrapersonal (Introverted), Logical (Reason/rational), and Kinesthetic (movement). Unfortunately, schools tend to teach only to Verbal and logical intelligences but through play based learning, more of these modes of learning can be utilized.

Some other learning theories that support play based learning are Erikson’s Life stages, Maslow’s

Hierarchy of needs.

Let us watch the following video (The magic school bus) to see other learning approaches that play based learning makes way for: As we can see in this clip, play based learning enables students to engage in Problem-based learning (PBL)

Inquiry Based Learning

Discovery- Based Learning

Hands-on Learning

Now let us look at some expressions on the padlet that you hopefully were able to arrive at using different play mediums.

As we hope that you can see, and hopefully look to implement in your classes as educators or work space, play based learning can be applicable any and all grade levels, and can be modified to fit different institutions. Play based learning allows for holistic development in an ever interconnected world. Through dance, music art, and drama; teachers can connect with students in a holistic manner that is most relevant to them – which allows for optimal learning.

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