

Playshop as Space for Emergent Learning

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Abstract: We propose a framework for learning as an emergent process where everyone involved experiences mutual transformation. We have organized many playshops for emergent learning in which people can re-invent their own view of themselves, re-design their own learning environment, and discover new potentials in themselves and the environments. Based on a three-phase model of trans-cultural collaboration, we discuss and outline how such emergent learning process can be facilitated and sustained.

Emergent Learning in Playshops

We need a new vision for learning in order to capture learning that goes beyond “acquisition of predefined knowledge and skills” and beyond existing cultures in our increasingly globalized society. We have designed and organized many “Playshops” as “space for playful learning” based on a set of concepts centered around “playful spirit”, which means to try to create new meanings by realizing full potentials of people and objects in any situation. (Mudpie Unlimited, 1999, 2001) In a playshop, we view learning as emergent: rather than making explicit goals of learning as in traditional instructional approach, we try to let a situation emerge where everyone involved experiences mutual transformation.

In this presentation, we try to illustrate our framework based on playshops we have organized from 2000 to 2004 on themes ranging from music, cross-cultural collaboration, to artworks, with participants ranging from primary school to university students. Based on analyses of these examples (Miyata et al., 2003, 2004 for detailed discussion) we discuss the kind of learning, the processes that supported learning, and what we have learned from these playshops.

As Table 1 summarizes, we can understand our playshops as going through three basic phases. The columns describe: the kind of activities we design (A); the roles the participants tend to assume (B); the kind of interactions that tend to occur (C); the focus of the participants' awareness (D); and the ways they tend to view themselves and other people (E).

Table 1. Summary of our framework for playshop

Phases	(A) Activity	(B) Role	(C) Interaction	(D) Awareness	(E) View
Begin	Getting into the mood Feel familiar	Participant Passive One-way	Communicating One-to-one	Individual Awareness of individual characteristics	Disembodied Individuals as separate entities
Continue	Expressing Make and share	Facilitator Help each other	Supporting Help others to communicate	Group Awareness of relationships	Embodied Individuals as situated, contextualized
Discover	Reflecting Discover, taste	Designer Redesign relations	Meta-Supporting Help others to support others.	Whole Awareness of community	Reflective Individuals as meaning makers

Below, we discuss those aspects that are especially relevant to emergent learning.

(E) View: From Disembodied to Embodied/Reflective View of the Self:

We found in each playshop that many participants experienced some kind of transformation of the way they view music, expression, foreign countries, people, or themselves. The transformations can be characterized as shifting from “disembodied/view”, in which one views oneself as separate from other people and objects, to “embodied or relational/emergent view” in which one views oneself as realizing one's potential by relating to other people and objects.

(C) Interaction: Supporting Each Other's Learning: In online communication in a

cross-cultural collaboration, involving several high schools and universities from Taiwan and Japan, we found that the shift to more embodied and reflective view was associated with changes in the nature of interaction. (Miyata et al. 2005) Through the four months collaboration, increasing number of “support expressions” were observed, which tried to facilitate communication between other, often less experienced, members. Moreover, “meta-support expressions” increased, which tried to support “support expressions”, in both experienced and less experienced members.

(B) Role: Learner as Designer: The participants of the playshop not only participated in the activities provided, but also often found their own goals and roles, involved other people, and tried to design environments in which to create something meaningful. The participants of learning environments turned themselves into designers of learning environments. By actively collaborating with others to create meaning, they are motivated to create learning environment for others, which in turn becomes their own learning environment.

Toward a Sustainable Learning Community: Moreover, the act of designing learning environment seems to propagate to new generations, resulting in a sustainable learning community. It is only when the environment we create motivates the people to re-create their own environments, that such an environment would become autonomous and sustainable. Such an environment involves not only the physical space or software, but also the relationships with the other people and the outside community as critically important factors.

Reinventing people’s personal theories of the self: Dweck and her associates (2000) report that whether children(people) view intelligence as an expandable competence, or as fixed entity, structure many aspects of people’s achievement and affect regarding learning, especially the goals they try to achieve: trying “to become smarter” vs. to “look smart”. While Dweck’s study has focused on personally-oriented theories of the self, analyses of our playshops suggest that it can be extended into socially-oriented theories. We believe that playshop is a space and opportunity for people to redesign their view of the self, so that they can re-design the relations with other people and objects in their own daily environment thereby re-discovering their potentials.

Learning Art: In this sense, emergent learning is an artistic process to awaken the potential for learning, by viewing one’s own environment from new perspectives to discover the boundless potentials hidden there, and create new meanings by making best use of the potentials. In our current project “Learning Art”, we explicitly treat participating children as workshop designers for younger children. Also, in this project, we view learning as a dynamic, artistic process, which tries to involve the communities surrounding the workshop so that people can appreciate and evaluate the learning that happens in the workshop.

References

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