
Guest editorial: Playful literacies across ages and contexts: new horizons for pleasure, affect, and living texts

Guest editorial

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, educators observed increased student stress and disconnection in formal learning environments, whereas young people turned to playing, gaming and collaborative writing to cultivate connections during this upheaval. Educational researchers' interest in extracurricular youth literacy practices recognizes the many benefits youth derive from their play in spaces that are largely unrecognized as productive learning sites. As editors of this special issue, we embrace play within and outside the classroom. We join critical scholars who argue that constructing learning spaces without attention to youth play, pleasure, desire and joy can reify inequitable learning environments that silence youth literacies, exclude their cultural practices and deaden their desire for education (Muhammad, 2020; Kirkland, 2013).

The presence of and engagement with others in playful spaces provides opportunities to take individual or collective action (Wohlwend, 2018), motivation for affect-laden reading and writing practices (Burnett and Merchant, 2020) and contexts for reflection and feedback (Magnifico *et al.*, 2015). Yet, for older learners, and increasingly for children, play is often rigidly constructed in relation to neoliberal, Eurocentric conceptions of value (Ahmed, 2020), productivity and use (Vossoughi *et al.*, 2016). For instance, we have heard defenses of play and games that directly connect to engendering design thinking, building engineering mindsets and preparing for careers in STEM industries (Kim and Johnson, 2021; Shaffer, 2006; Yoon, 2014).

This special issue challenges these normalized conceptualizations as we play with literacies theory and practice across varied ages, media and contexts to ask how literacy studies can reinvigorate perspectives on play at a time when its value has come again to the fore. We wonder: how might educators better understand playful literacies as a vital outlet for pleasurable discovery, socialization and community building – within and beyond formal education and neoliberal notions of use? How might scholars broaden and critique the predominantly Eurocentric conceptions of play that pervade literacy research? To answer these questions, this issue highlights play as a humanizing element of literacies education, across the life span and across environments and contexts.

We are excited to share this collection and offer new visions of how play can provide space(s) for children, adolescents, adults and teachers to think beyond traditional academic structures to imagine more joyful possibilities. Article authors explore the critical potentials of playful literacies and the power of affective pedagogies, highlighting the intertextual nature of play. Findings show how players use play objects in dynamic and skilled ways to make meaning in virtual and real spaces and playscapes. Individually and collectively, these articles illustrate how play can challenge neoliberal ideas about teaching and learning (e.g. play is most useful when it prepares youth for future work), as well as bring joy.

Special issue overview

Ten articles – one literature review, eight data-driven and one authored by a community research partner – make up this special issue. The articles use makerspaces, literary texts



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and videogames to illustrate research from elementary and secondary schools, bilingual spaces and after-school communities.

Setting the scene for this special issue, Mannard's literature review defies the trivialization of playful methods in content-focused discourses, instead exposing the conceptual and methodological depth that playful literacies actually possess. It invites educators to break traditional boundaries and assumptions about play and shows the potential for pleasure to reinvent our classrooms and learning spaces. As readers will discover, Mannard's call deeply resonates with the data-driven studies that complete this special issue.

Reading, composing and creating as playful literacies

This group of articles invites us to examine the *creative* value of playfulness as a learning opportunity. They reach beyond gadgets, reconceptualizing what we mean by *play* and *literacies* in the process.

Leading off this conversation, Thiel explores how playful making events in an afterschool community makerspace deterritorialize traditional composition practices/pedagogies in literacy classrooms. By analyzing three moments when young people engaged in self-directed maker literacies, this article illustrates how children's playful compositions *are* indeed writing practices that mimic many of the skills teachers encourage during traditional writing instruction. Thiel suggests that literacy educators deterritorialize their own practices to notice how children engage in these skills.

Using Thiel's previous theoretical work, Woodard and colleagues explore playful dramatizing, multimodal composing and science learning through one fourth-grade girl's video about food chains. This rich analysis of "muchness" in action highlights the student's perspective-taking, intertextual play and enthusiasm as she embodies and narrates characters to convey meaning. We see disciplinary teachers encourage creativity and fun, helping students see "play as a natural and important part of science learning."

Next, Jones, Storm and Corbitt shift the conversation into literary analysis via Tumblr. Through topic modeling and multimodal content analysis, the authors show how fans of "Dracula Daily," a massive synchronous instance of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, read in affective and intertextual ways. Classic texts have a reputation for making classrooms dull, but Tumblr users' memes, hashtags and recontextualizations allow "readers to both engage with literary literacies and disrupt and re-write them."

Finally, Beauchemin and Qin take up affect as relational and performed forces that emerge from the inbetweenness among people, objects and material and discursive contexts. Through this lens, they examine how two US Latinx teachers and their young bilingual students co-construct affect and play in translanguaging read-alouds. The authors suggest that these contexts can afford bilingual children opportunities to playfully engage with texts that center their cultural epistemologies.

Digital cultures as spaces to (re)imagine playful literacies in schools

Conventionally, when people hear "video games," they often overlook their potential within classrooms and teacher education. This group of articles provokes new meanings of play and literacy as we welcome digital cultures into our classrooms.

First, Lenters examines how Canadian first- and second-graders' literacy play with two "adult-oriented" videogames, *Among Us* and *Poppy Playtime*, caused discomfort. Lenters resists moral panic over children's use of new media, including online games. Using Tsing's (2015) concept of contamination, she shows how children's play can change adults'

perceptions of these games from threatening objects to potential spaces for transgressive world-building with adult mentors.

McBride, Smith and Kalir ask how playful, subversive learning could benefit teacher education. Three “worked examples” examine digital literacies in English education courses. The authors powerfully show that playful pedagogies can infuse joy and humanity into teacher education while reminding us of the need for critical questions about who can play in school, and under what circumstances.

Next, Curwood and Theodoulou examine how students move from the idea that videogames are bad for learning to seeing them as multimodal, complex storytelling. They examine a tenth-grade Australian classroom and show how the videogame *What Remains of Edith Finch* increases student engagement and curricular outcomes. As in the articles by Lenters and McBride and colleagues, authors demonstrate that playful literacies can help students become more invested in school practices without compromising learning expectations.

Robinson and Wright examine how institutional imperatives and discourses impose pressures on *Giga-Games Camp* adolescents’ videogame play and design. They analyze how these pressures affected participants as they circulated in the camp, subtly pushing otherwise playful and creative production toward “future-proof STEM learning.” The authors illustrate how ethical and pedagogical commitments to playful literacies counter neoliberal tendencies that devalue youth’s playful designs.

Finally, in “Press Play,” community leader Karl André St-Victor describes how playful practices at Chalet Kent, a community youth center in Montréal, sustain strong senses of belonging and companionship among youth and center staff. These playful practices develop solidarity in innovative integrations of language, literacies and youth cultures, for example, by integrating philosophy and kickboxing in Philo-Box.

A brief coda

Although editing special issues can be taxing, especially across contexts and time zones, it is also extremely rewarding. We hope ETPC readers will agree that this group of articles leaves us with generative ideas and suggestions for reinventing playful education. Working with this amazing group of authors and reviewers inspires us to keep pushing the boundaries of what playful literacies can be, both in and out of classrooms. We celebrate the lessons we learned and invite you to keep playing toward more innovative, equitable and joyful educational futures.

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