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A (PLAYFUL) TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Play is central to my life. It guides my research, reinforces my outlook on the world, and, most importantly, it influences my teaching. Play is not only for children and not just about games: it is an attitude of creativity and intellectual freedom, tempered by the structure of the classroom. As a practice ground for the real world, playful tactics help students develop their voices and learn to look critically at the world. Play becomes particularly important in the context of media studies, where I encourage students to engage with popular culture that they encounter every day, using a critical eye. In my Media studies and Communication courses I encourage students to push themselves and see the world differently than they might otherwise. In this way, media can be seen as a puzzle; a game for students to decode. By working with students to puzzle out larger narratives in popular culture, we learn together.

Playful learning is project oriented. Often, I have students engage with the materials by assigning larger, collaborative projects. By working together in groups, students are able to see media from a larger cross-section of ideas and expand their worldview. I have assigned students to design board games, create fictional utopias, construct web sites, make youtube videos, and pitch video game ideas. In these assignments, I try to teach students that team-play is every bit as valuable as solo-play.

Writing is another important part of my classes. While my courses invariably require longer writing projects, I also assign weekly journals. Journal writing is a way for students to become more playful and comfortable with words. I allow students to be as free-form as they wish with journal assignments, so long as they stick to the topic and engage with the material through writing. In recent years, I have asked students to use new media tools (such as wikis and blogs) in order to encourage word and idea play. I have found that these shorter assignments improve their longer writing projects. I consider longer papers and essays to be living documents that change over time. By teaching students to write essays iteratively, they learn to work through ideas gradually by working playfully.

But in a playful classroom, the students are not the only learners! I have found that through play, my own ideas, my research, and subsequently, my teaching has been reshaped. When I taught my first courses in communication at Endicott College in 2004 and 2005, I was a far more rigid instructor, teaching close to syllabus and notes tightly in hand. More recently, when teaching *The History and Culture of Games* to RPI freshmen in 2006, I began to use more playful tactics to approach the topic, using more new media, group projects, and open-ended discussions. Students responded well to the course, and I learned to introduce play into my teaching philosophy. In the future, my communication courses will increasingly use play to approach all levels of communication and media studies. By keeping an open mind and always being willing to learn from my students, I hope to constantly challenge how I see both the classroom and the world.