



International Association of Facilitators
The Art and Mastery of Facilitation – Worlds of Change
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
April 27 – 30, 2000



World of Professional Discipline

A PASSION FOR PLAY

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Abstract

In facilitated workshops, appropriate play activities can help bring participants to a positive emotional state – an essential requirement for learning, creative thinking and idea-generation. Playful activities can also diffuse tension and increase group members' sense of discovery, participation and involvement.

This paper describes comfortable ways of introducing play in facilitated workshops. It outlines the What, Why, When, How, and Who of play. Five major types of play that facilitators can use in their sessions are described. These are Body-Movement, Musical, Linguistic/Humour, Logical/Mathematical, and Visual/Spatial. Play used strategically at the beginning of sessions to relax



participants, and at other times, to energize and stimulate innovative thinking, produces breakthrough results.

Why Play?

The latest brain research shows the monumental importance of creating a positive climate for learning. Hannaford (1999) says “Play lays the groundwork for creative thinking in adulthood. Play raises the Dopamine (brain chemical) levels, which are important for neural plasticity and optimal learning.” She goes on to say, “When we experience the complexity of others through play, we realize we are not separate... According to Einstein, we are patterns of energy slowed down enough that we perceive ourselves as matter. When we begin to look at ourselves as vibration, our work with people takes on a new perspective and we become more attuned facilitators.”

Many times, we enter a room as the group’s facilitator only to discover that no one really wants to be there. This is a common reaction because many groups have never experienced a good facilitator or any facilitated session at all! In these situations, we can ask ourselves, “what do I need to do to set them at ease so the “work” can begin?” Encourage them to be playful! I believe that play, used wisely, can break barriers and build cooperation, trust and communication.

What is Play?

Play is any activity that results in participants experiencing enthusiasm, joy, curiosity, discovery, humour and laughter. Play might be games, but often it is an expression of sheer creativity and laughter. Both creativity and laughter are for me, the work of the spirit. Play can be as simple as creating a “playful” state, through room décor and music. For example, use uplifting instrumental music. Place coloured cloths and simple toys (squeeze balls, magic wands,

toy cars) on the tables. Provide fine-tipped coloured markers and highlighters for every person. And voila! You have created the possibility of a playful state.

When to Play?

The best times to introduce play are:

- near the beginning of the session,
- just before starting a new topic,
- when the work has been extremely heavy and demanding, and
- before strategic or innovative thinking sessions.

It is also useful in the early or mid afternoon, as a way to raise the energy levels of participants. On average, I use six to seven “formal” play breaks in a one-day long session. Some of these are 30-second play breaks – for example, toss around a Koosh ball or have a sponge frisbee throw. Longer formal play breaks last from three to fifteen minutes. The timing for play is critical – there must be an obvious reason for the play activity or your logical group members will resist and create a negative experience.

When Not to Play?

Do not use play when:

- 1) You are not sure about the group and it is a “high risk” situation.
- 2) The group needs to struggle through a problem a little while longer.

An example of the first situation was when I was working with a Deputy Minister and her directors in a large, formal room. In this situation, I used only a simple centerpiece that later became the focus of some metaphorical thinking. I introduced play in the second and third sessions when they knew me, and were not threatened by my suggestions.



If you use play when a group is in the midst of resolving conflict, play will only distract them from the deeper, more difficult thinking they need to do. When the group appears drained and unable to move further in their thinking, appropriately timed play may help them to access new insights on their problem.

Generally when participants first enter a room set up to encourage play, they are heard remarking – “Oh, I am looking forward to this session!” or “This is going to be fun!” There will also be a few participants who say to themselves, “ Well, I am not sure about this – looks a little touchy, feely to me” or “ What is this nonsense? We are here to work!” If you sense this in anyone, remark casually, “The toys are for people who think better if they have something in their hands or are moving. You are free to play with them or ignore them.” If you sense that most of the group will have a negative reaction to toys or to any kind of play, it is better to wait to introduce it. If in doubt, ask ahead of time, if participants would be open to a playful atmosphere.

I often have a “play bag” handy just in case I need it – sometimes it never comes out.

How do we play?

Based on Howard Gardner’s¹ intelligences theory (Armstrong, 1993) I use play that encourages:

- 1. Body-movement** through toys and active games
- 2. Musical** stimulation – sounds, dance, song,

¹Gardner, a psychologist, proposed that we each have many intelligences different from the standard IQ test of intelligence. The seven he named are: bodily-kinesthetic, logical-mathematical, musical, inter-personal, intra-personal, linguistic, and visual-spatial. He has added an eighth intelligence which he calls naturalistic.

3. Linguistic/humour skills – stories, anecdotes, jokes, cartoons, sayings, metaphors

4. Logical/mathematical skills – brain-teasers, logic puzzles, guessing games

5. Visual/spatial stimulation – drawing, coloured pens for all, centerpieces, and posters

These are described below:

Body-Movement

My favourite type of play involves toys that encourage both fine and gross motor activity.

Here are some of my preferred toys (see resources list for where to find some of them):

- Sponge (*Nerf*) frisbees (five different colors to throw around as an immediate and always effective energizer)
- *Koosh* balls (to throw around at breaks)
- Neon *Porcupine* balls (cheaper and different texture than *Koosh* balls)
- Smiley face stress balls (for participants to hold while they are listening and thinking)
- Sand-filled stress squeezers (for the really nervous participants these are especially soothing)
- Hand clappers (to give applause when a small group presents)
- Colourful plastic slinkies (for participants to play with and for metaphor work – see below)
- Magic, see-through wand (*Find Waldo* ones are most popular)
- Chinese Iron Balls (put two in your hand and try to roll them around without one ball touching the other)
- Bouncing “eye-balls”
- Many kinds of toy vehicles (helps with metaphorical thinking –e.g., what kind of vehicle would you need to help you solve this problem and why?)
- Leggo (large type)



In North America, the best place to find great toy props is the local dollar store or “new age” gift and book shops. Visit different stores at different times of the year, as the variety is great between stores and seasons.

Here are a few ways to use toys:

- **Frisbemanía** – have each participant take two to or three lightweight sponge frisbees (order from *Creative Walking Inc.*) Ask participants to stand up. When the lively music begins, tell them to throw the frisbees at each other from a distance of about one metre (three to four feet). Ask them to count their score: Players win one point only if they say “sorry!” when they “hit” someone. Players lose a point when they hit someone in the face. Encourage them to gather frisbees that are on the ground and keep flinging them at each other until the music stops. Give participants the option of watching from the sidelines, if they prefer. I am always amazed at how much laughter and energy this activity generates. (Few remember to track their score.) This activity shifts the mood of the group quickly and oxygenates the brain for more productive work. This is especially helpful just after lunch. To debrief the exercise, sometimes I use the metaphor of many ideas flying around the room and in brainstorming we need to capture as many different ideas as possible even those which are “off the wall” or “hit us in the face”. There are many ways of relating the visual impact of flying frisbees to the work they are doing.
- **Introductions** - At the beginning of the session, lay out many toys, rocks, and other props. Have participants choose one object that appeals to them and tell their small group why this toy or prop symbolizes what energy or ideas they hope to bring to the group together. After the safety of small group sharing, you may wish to have them share the reasons for their choice with the whole group.

- **Four toy game** - Each small group of four to six persons demonstrates their creativity by using only four toys (e.g., a ball, a frisbee, a balloon and a slinky) to create a new game that will be demonstrated to the entire group. After four minutes, each group demonstrates their unique game with the entire group (all have the same four toys). Applaud after each game demo. This activity reminds the group of the inherent creativity within each of us. It is useful before a strategic directions workshop or activity requiring innovative thinking. It also allows participants to experience the possibilities of a “high-performing team”.
- **Other body-movement activities** – Other types of movement you can encourage are stretching, standing up and walking around, getting people to switch tables, having people converse with another small group to get their ideas, and having them conduct a three-minute “stand up” interview of another person about the topic. You can also play dance music or other high-energy music while tossing around anything soft and light. Please note that heavy objects or hard balls (even *Nerf* footballs) frighten some participants and immediately put them into a “fight or flight” mode. This is the opposite state of what you want.

Musical

The field of accelerated learning encourages the use of background music for enhanced learning and productivity. Don Campbell (1999), author of “*The Mozart Effect*” says, “Patterned tonal sound, coupled with movement, relaxation and visual stimulation improves memory, pleasure and safety while learning. All language, logic, emotion, movement and communication is rhythmic pattern.” Music, a right brain activity, helps long term memory and accesses the emotions. There are many ways to skillfully use music to create the right mood for the work to be done. Here are two ways to use music:



Visionary thinking –Play Carlos Nakai music – *Canyon Trilogy* – as you guide a group through a vision process. This music helps people access future thinking almost instantly.

Welcoming music - Before a session starts, I use Vivaldi’s “*Four Seasons*” or Wynton Marsalis’ “*Gabriel’s Garden*”, Ray Lynch’s “*Deep Breakfast*”, Oscar Lopez’ “*Seduction*” or “*The Mozart Effect - Heal the Body*”. Baroque music² (60-80 beats per minute) is generally universally accepted music. About 20 to 40% of your group (based on my informal surveys of many groups) will have musical intelligence as one of their primary learning modes. The other 60 to 80% enjoy music and generally find it enhances their mood. A small minority may not. Be prepared to keep the music low or turn it off if someone shows discomfort with your choice of music. Everyone has music that promotes a positive vibration and everyone has music that creates negative tension in the body (Steven Halpern, 1999). I have found however, that music is more of a plus than a deterrent. To be sure of a positive effect with music, use properly sequenced music according to the instructions given. “*The Mozart Effect*” series is one example. You can also order music from *OptimaLearning* (see references).

Linguistic/humour

Use **Brainteasers** and lots of **positive stories** at appropriate windows of opportunity. Have participants make up a story and slogan to integrate their vision and/or action plans. At the end of a planning workshop or any brainstorming session, ask groups of four or five to each create something symbolic about the journey of the day or to integrate the results they have developed. Give them five minutes to come back with a simple three-chapter story, slogan, song, symbol, or simple role-play (see Bruce McWilliams “50 Ways To Build Team

² Music composed circa 1600 to 1750. Commonly known composers of this era include Corelli, Mozart, Vivaldi, Handel, Bach, Pachelbel, Rossini, Dvorak, Wagner, Albioni...

Consensus”). Participants generally respond to this concluding activity whole-heartedly and leave the workshop with a sense of wonder and marvel.

Wilderness survival **simulations** are also playful activities that promote a sense of synergy. There are also word puzzles available from *The Bob Pike Group* – called “*Wuzzles*”. Finally, put quotable quotes, humourous books and humourous puns etc. on every small group table. My favourite small books are versions of *Farside*, *Garfield*, *Waldo*, *Dave Barry*, and *Robert Fulghum*. My newest favourite toy is a little box that shakes on the table and says in a clear strained voice “Excuse me... Excuse me... will someone let me out of here?!” (Order from *Tool Thyme*). This last toy can relieve tension at the end of a long and difficult obstacles/contradictions workshop.

Logical/Mathematical

Prior to beginning a session in the morning and just after lunch, try some brainteaser quizzes written on a flipchart or set out logic puzzles for people to experience. You can also intentionally create a five-minute logic play break just prior to work requiring logical thinking.

Visual/Spatial

Imagery is a powerful medium to tap into the subconscious mind. By using pictures, colour and beauty, the facilitator taps into a richer source of information - stored in that marvelous middle brain – where pictures are the main thing and words do not exist. I am astonished at how freeing it is to have a group work with images rather than words. For example, I had a group that already had a vision statement so I had them sit quietly through a guided journey of their future. They then wrote down their thoughts on paper. In small groups, they drew **collective pictures** of what they had imagined. As they described their pictures to the whole group, the vision was far more powerful than the original words they had written down for



themselves. An excitement crept in, as they were better able to imagine the future when they drew simple pictures. Be sure to tell the group that stick drawings and symbols are fine and not to worry about “artistry”.

Artist’s own creations - Spread long white paper on tables available for doodling use anytime .This paper can be bought in rolls of at least 100 metres from *Lewis Art supplies* in Canada at least.

Multi-coloured markers & highlighters - Encourage participants to use colour and drawings in their small group flipchart presentations. Do simple drawings to accompany all your own flipcharts and overheads. Many facilitator-training institutes offer courses on graphic facilitation. Create mind-maps to record brainstorming sessions. (See Tony Buzan’s – “The Mindmap Book”).

Who Do I Play With?

Play is open to everyone. I have used play with senior government officials, lawyers, managers, engineers, nurses, CEO’s, teachers, youth and First Nations groups. There is only one group that I facilitated in the last five years, that appeared not to appreciate the effects of play. They were administrators from a conservative rural town. In retrospect, I likely introduced play too quickly – I did not know the group well enough, or they did not know me. If I had toned down the use of play, introduced it later and given more context for its importance in producing results, I feel they would have accepted it as a valid tool for enhancing productivity. Despite their reservations, I feel the results of those sessions were more remarkable with the play than they would have been without it.

A Final Word

You need to be comfortable introducing play. Do it gradually so you can see the results for yourself. Remember that your purpose in introducing play is to create a positive emotional state for participants. Different types of play will help participants access different parts of their brain and thus different kinds of thinking (see “The Creative Brain” by Ned Herrmann). I recommend attending the annual International Association of Accelerated Learning Conference for further ideas and theory on this important research on the brain. (www.ialearn.org). Have fun creating your own unique play style. Skillfully used, these new tools will help you to achieve a new level of excellence as a facilitator.

Resources

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Creative Walking Inc. To order *Nerf Frisbees*. P.O. Box 50296 Clayton Missouri, 63105, U.S.A. (314) 721-3600



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OptimaLearning. www.optimalearning.com (415) 898-0013

Pike, Robert W. 1994. *Creative Training Techniques Handbook. Tips, Tactics and How-to's for Delivering Effective Training.* Lakewood Books . Minneapolis.

Tool Thyme for Trainers. To order toys and games - 504-887-5558 or see website at www.tool-trainers.com.

The Trainers Warehouse. 1-800 299-3770 or fax 508-651-2674 or sales@trainerswarehouse.com

Biography

Barbara MacKay, principal of **North Star Facilitators**, specializes in facilitation, training, and public speaking. She is also an associate facilitator with the international Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA). Barbara combines gentleness and firmness, humour and compassion, fun and productive learning. She has an energetic style, clear delivery, and helps groups find their way. She is dedicated to her own and others' continuous professional and personal growth. She

has a Master of Science degree in Resource Management and is fluently bilingual (English/French). She has delivered or facilitated over 600 workshops or presentations to all sectors.

Services Offered:

- Facilitation and facilitator training
- Strategic planning
- Team building
- Conflict Resolution
- Accelerated Learning
- Keynote speeches

Barbara has helped many organizations with planning over the last nineteen years. In addition to helping groups plan, problem-solve, and build productive teams, Barbara offers workshops and presentations in facilitation skills, conflict resolution, accelerated learning and wellness. These include the tools: *Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument* (HBDI) and *Why Are You Like That?*[™] She skilfully uses the principles of participation and accelerated learning to create lively, productive and participatory workshops. You can reach Barbara at bamackay@videon.wave.ca or at (204) 475-7113.