



Creative Collaborations: Emergent Play in the Preschool Art Studio

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During the early summer of 2015, I began my first internship at a museum-based learning preschool in Washington, D.C. Having completed my first year of graduate school in art education, a time in which I also gained teaching experience, I felt that I was now better prepared to begin my work as a teacher and researcher of young children's art. One task as an art specialist intern was to facilitate an art studio session every afternoon for 5-year-old students. I naively envisioned children creating artworks that followed my lesson plans and instructions. However, as soon as I embarked on this journey and began teaching these sessions, I witnessed two startling aspects that were contrary to my preconception of childhood art. First, for the children, art was not only about creating visual artifacts but also embracing the performativities of play, which occurred spontaneously and emergently. Second, children's artmaking was interwoven with social interactions such as communication and collaboration.

In relation to the concepts of social interaction and art practice, this article engages with these findings in order to explore children's emergent collaborative play in the art studio. Children's sociocultural practice through visual art has been supported by art education research (Pearson, 2001; Thompson, 1995, 2003, 2009; Wilson & Wilson, 2010). I build on such acknowledgments by examining children's social practice beyond the artmaking, which incorporates spontaneous play performances. Embodying the roles as an observer, facilitator, and researcher, I undertake a phenomenological approach¹ to look into the 5-year-olds' play events that occurred at the studio located inside the preschool. Between the two classrooms, the participants were children who were awake during nap time and who chose to come to the art studio instead of participating in other activities in the classrooms. Within the 1 hour of studio time, a maximum of 10 students were able to work at any given time, and students could be added or switched.² Prior to conducting research, I had acquired parental consent to study the participants' artwork and narrative with the understanding that the collected data would consist of field notes, audio recordings, and photographed documentations. The

documentations collected at the studio are used in this article for describing children's play events, followed by discussions about children's creative collaborations.

Social Practice in the Preschool Art Studio

At the beginning of every studio session, I encouraged children to draw on individual sketchbooks for the first 20 minutes before working on any main activity. I listened and often participated in the conversations that arose during this time, and have come to



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realize that drawing, especially for young children, is a significant performance of social practice. Art education theorist Phil Pearson (2001) claims that drawing can be “a play activity, narrative activity, a strategy for social approval, or a pursuit of the inductively grasped competence appropriate to given representation systems” (p. 358). The children at the studio voluntarily told stories about *what* they were drawing and *how* they were doing it and also played *at, in,* and *with* the drawings (Wood & Hall, 2011). Also, considering children's drawing as personal yet public performance, Christine Thompson (1995) writes that voluntary drawing helps students “learn something about themselves as artists, as individuals, and as participants in the cultures which converge and emerge in their classroom” (p. 7). Such child-initiated drawing, therefore, is a form of artmaking different from teacher-initiated lessons; it invites children to affirm their social competencies. Therefore, in voluntary drawing children not only create graphic artifacts but also interact with peers.

Similarly, children's play activities involve various forms of social practices. For young children, understanding their world strongly depends on their play, exploration, and imagination (Gopnik, 2010). That is, play is a form of socialization that allows young children to learn about planning, negotiating, problem solving, and collaborating with others. Even in complex play events with peers, children learn how to find solutions to the conflicts (Howes & Lee, 2007). Children's social performance of play actively involves verbal and nonverbal communication skills that function to deliver one's intentions, rules or roles, and narratives in the play context. That is, through voice and gesture, children continuously utter and respond to each other constructing the socialization necessary to the play. Moreover, Sutton-Smith and Heath (1981) regard pretense as a means of significant communication, arguing, “imaginative play needs to be considered first and foremost as communication” (p. 41). This notion affirms that children practice their social agency through various communicative tools in play, improvising pretended roles and situations. This article, therefore, views children's self-initiated play as social practice, where multiple interactions between agents emerge in the realm of art. The following section illustrates two salient play events that spontaneously occurred in the studio.

In the social practice of art and play, children form particular peer cultures that appropriate information from the adult world (Corsaro, 1997). Rather than regarding them as passive recipients of culture, Corsaro (1997) notes that it is important to recognize “the innovative and creative aspects of children's participation in the society” (p. 18). In this sense, children are capable of collectively and collaboratively practicing social relations and the meanings imbedded in particular social situations. Among multiple groups children engage with, the peer group is the most significant public realm for children (Corsaro, 1985). In my research, I observed children engaging in group art activities intentionally and/or unintentionally with peers in the studio: They drew together, played together, and collaboratively engaged in various activities. Based on these concepts and my observations, this study endeavors to see how the peer culture and collaborative artmaking come about in the art studio. Considering how

accumulated, everyday social interactions in the studio constitute emergent play events meaningful to an individual and to the group, the next sections describe two play events that spontaneously occurred in the studio.

PLAY EVENT 1: Making an Igloo

One morning, the school unexpectedly received a stack of large rectangular styrofoam slats from a family. As children entered the art studio that afternoon, they immediately wished to play with the uncanny material placed in the corner of the art studio. Although I had planned a painting activity for the afternoon, I allowed the students to play with the styrofoam after sketchbook time. Shortly after, the children swiftly pulled out the slats one by one to the opened space; they first explored the materiality of the styrofoam panels by breaking them into smaller pieces, feeling the texture of the bumpy parts, and jumping on them. Some played with the pieces as open-ended objects, while others used them as canvas, drawing on the surface with markers.

In the meantime, one girl initiated the idea of building an igloo with the pieces. As children agreed and began to break down the large styrofoam slats into smaller pieces, two girls began to draw rectangles on the surface of the styrofoam pieces to make a window. They then wished to use tools to punch holes through the styrofoam and the only thing I could suggest was child-friendly scissors to use as gimlets. Since punching one hole at a time with scissors required patience and time, the players adeptly divided themselves by tasks: Some drew rectangles on the surface with markers, and others worked on punching holes following the marker lines (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Punching windows for the igloo.





Figure 2. The end of winter wonderland.

Children experienced frustration due to the fragile materiality of styrofoam and as a result of failing to successfully punch holes into a rectangular shape. Consequently, the physical play of jumping on the styrofoam and breaking it into smaller and smaller pieces became more distinct than executing the initial plan to construct an igloo. As the excitement elevated, the squeaky sound of styrofoam breaking filled the room along with the energetic voices. Children now pretended as if the studio space was winter wonderland, gathering the crumbs and joyfully spraying them up in the air as if it was snowing. This play event concluded with filling the whole studio space with styrofoam pieces and crumbs as studio time was over (Figure 2).

PLAY EVENT 2: Constructing Space Stations

Five days after the first encounter with the styrofoam, four children entered the studio after nap time. The two boys, Robert and Zach, began playing with aluminum pans, pretending they were astronauts (Figure 3). They found empty plastic bottles from



Figure 3. Playing astronauts.

the recycle bin in the studio and attached them on the pans with duct tape to create a spaceship for each. After playing with the spaceships for a while, naming themselves as “star fighters,” they decided that their spaceships needed a “space station” as a place to land and blast off. Robert and Zach then grabbed large styrofoam slats from the pile to make the space station.



Figure 4 (above). Building two separate space stations.

Figure 5 (below). Construction in progress for a combined space station.



Noticing the styrofoam slats being pulled out, Hannah and Alyssa spontaneously joined the group, teaming up as pairs to build the space station—Hannah partnered with Robert, and Zach paired with Alyssa (except for Zach, all the players were present during the first event of creating winter wonderland). The players insisted that they first needed to make a base on the ground. They grabbed two more styrofoam slats to construct walls and asked me to use duct tape to hold them together. Each team built a station including roofs and additional walls so that the pan-spaceship could be situated inside (Figure 4). Hannah and Robert discussed whether they should tape the roof but decided not to tape it so that spaceships could be taken out of the space station. On the other side of the studio, Zach was proposing that balancing tests were needed to ensure the stability of the structures. After using all the



Figure 6. Pretending to be in a laboratory.

duct tape I had, children then used chairs to support the space station walls.

Alyssa called to the other team, saying, “Look at ours.” Building separate space stations gradually developed into a competition. As the other team took some pieces to add on to their construction, Zach yelled, “Stop stealing! We’re using our own.” Perceiving that the competition was producing frustration, I suggested, “How about we share?” After an a-ha moment, Zach repeated my words with excitement, “How about we share the base?” Then, Alyssa enthusiastically responded by saying, “How about... we make a bigger one with both of ours?” Zach became excited, jumping and shouting, “Hip, hip, hurray! Hip, hip, hurray!” Zach then insisted that he needed more styrofoam pieces, repeating “The better the merrier! The better the merrier!” (Figure 5).

Proceeding to combine and construct the space station together, children shifted back and forth between pretending to be astronauts and the reality of constructing sturdy space stations. Sitting on the chairs and pretending to work on a desk, Robert said to Alyssa, sitting beside him, “Ooh, I got a little desk.” Alyssa found another chair in front of her and sat like Robert, saying, “You can be at the back and I’m at the front” (Figure 6). Robert spoke to himself, “My little home desk.” Then Zach approached to Robert and Alyssa with curiosity, asking, “What are those?” Alyssa responded, “This is a computer and now I’m going in here, okay?” She then left the spot to go inside, entering the opened space in the rectangular styrofoam construction (Figure 7). Zach then took Alyssa’s seat and also pretended to be in a lab. He stated, “I’m in my lab! Tap, tap, ta-da-tap!” Robert joined the noisemaking: “Tap,



Figure 7. Stepping inside to the space station.



Figure 8. Three children playing inside the space station.

tap, tap, tap, tap.... Okay everybody, tap, tap, tap....” Then, jumping up from the chair, he announced that they should move over to a different space.

Meanwhile, Hannah became determined to crawl inside one of the styrofoam-surrounded boxes. She carefully removed the wall like opening a door, making sure that it was still supporting the roof part, and crawled inside. Robert followed behind her as an attempt to crawl inside as well, but before putting his body completely into the space, he informed everyone else, “Hey, I figured that we can go inside this little thing.” He then put himself completely inside the space and left the door open. Having listened to Robert’s announcement, Alyssa ran toward them and crawled into the space and closed the door behind her. There were three children in the tiny space surrounded by styrofoam slats. The door was closed for a couple of seconds. After a wiggly moment, perhaps situating themselves in better positions, Alyssa and Robert opened the door to peek out: As if they were looking for anyone who had noticed their adventure, they searched for attention (Figure 8). When Zach approached, they meticulously affirmed that the space was full, refusing to let him join. Soon after, the studio time was over and the children had to clean up and return to their classrooms.

Emergent Collaborations as Playful Art

Both play events occurred emergently on the encounter with a new material that conjured up multiple possibilities. In the first play event, sensing the texture, sound, and shapes, children examined the materiality of styrofoam that is subject to transformation through processing. Despite the frustration at the styrofoam’s fragility in punching rectangular windows, the “innate problematic of the material” (Adorno, in Leach, 2005, p. 12) helped them learn about both the infinite possibilities as well as its weaknesses as a result of playing with it. This learning experience might have guided problem-solving skills for developing a construction with the same material for the subsequent play event since the majority of children in the second event were present

at the first. During the second play event of constructing space stations, children seemed more adept in using the material: They carefully supported the lightweight styrofoam slats with more solid objects such as chairs, and gently situated each piece by continuously checking whether the construction was still holding together.

The sensational process of experimenting with an unfamiliar material enabled children to learn what they could do with and about the material, constituting “knowledge in the making” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 1). This concept of embodied sensations and lived experience not only contributes to individual knowledge but also creates a degree of “group cultural knowledge” (Bateson, 1972). That is, the rules and roles that existed in the play context acted as signals to decide which systems are appropriate to apply. For example, breaking down the styrofoam, discussing their unique ideas of how to create an igloo with windows, and then enacting their roles of drawing squares or punching holes to create those windows all signify that implicit play rules emerged during the first collaborative play event. Likewise, during the second play event, there seemed to be roles each child was committed to, such as Hannah continuously making sure the space station structure was stable and Robert taking the lead to direct the group.

In documenting the play events, I observed that children gravitated toward the process rather than product. That is, in both play events, children excitedly played within the process of playing and making, switching back and forth between pretend play and the reality of construction. When building the igloo and punching windows on styrofoam pieces, children simultaneously imagined the imagery of winter wonderland and developed the group play into a physical, imaginative play of spraying the white particles into the air. Similarly, while committed to making constructions stable as space stations in the second event, children also pretended to be astronauts working in a laboratory. More than a task to complete, the process of making incorporated a playful performance that represented daily encounters with popular visual culture and imaginations as well as a venue that brings presence

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to things—that is, their sculptural creation was an object to play with and a space to play in (Park, 2016). During this phase, the children drew on a broader scope of verbal languages. Essential communication skills were involved such as requesting to be play partners, announcing what was being pretended or discovered, and allowing or disallowing other children to join in particular play spaces. Attuned to Sutton-Smith and Heath's (1981) notion of pretense as a means of significant communication, this suggests that both the children's imaginative play of pretending to make winter wonderland and acting as if they were in space could be seen as a communicative performance that enhanced the children's social interactivity and artistic playfulness.

Revisiting the documentations, I observed how the studio space where children's social competencies were regularly practiced through voluntary sketchbook drawing invited them to expand possibilities to create a new type of art, through play—a different form of art engagement. Drawing on sketchbooks allowed the children to become better acquainted with certain art skills and to learn about themselves and their cultures through the process of making art. This event also invited the children to expand possibilities and collaborate with a new material through play. Through the process of proposition, modification, conflict, and negotiation, they challenged their capacities to create art in collaboration.

I acknowledge the fact that children's self-directed, emergent play may not always be encouraged in art classes. However, I suggest that it is important to support play activities in early childhood art education rather than focusing too heavily on the products of art activities. It is important for educators to consider the process of children's artmaking and play as a significant artistic language of social competencies. In other words, children's spontaneous, collaborative play that draws on their past experiences and imagination urges art educators to be attentive not only to the finished results, the visual artifacts that children produce, but also the social practices, processes, and play from which these artifacts emerge. ■

Author Note

This article is based on the author's master's thesis, "Collaborative Researchers: Young Children's Emergent Play in the Art Studio," written in 2016.

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Endnotes

- ¹ The phenomenological research approach examines the core of various phenomena, making clear the researcher's perspective without devolving into generalizations. This research approach focuses on description; explores the intentional relationship between individuals and situations; and discloses the essences, or structures, of meaning immanent in human experiences (Finlay, 2009).
- ² The participants' relationships are interesting to note: Children coming to the studio were from two different classrooms, randomly changing on a daily basis. Some only had an opportunity to interact in the studio and returned to their home classrooms after an hour. Children nonetheless communicated, collaborated, and played with each other. This type of children's relationship could be conceived as "compartmentalized friendships" (Adler & Alder, 1998, p. 136), which are relationships that might easily be available for interaction at only certain times and places. Compartmentalized friends might focus on specific activities or skills, presenting certain characteristics of an individual that are "somehow constrained, restricted, or confined, by location, setting, time, season, dimension, or role" (Adler & Alder, 1998, p. 136).

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