

MindShift

How Can Teachers Prepare Kids for a Connected World?

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Educators are always striving to find ways to make curriculum relevant in students' everyday lives. More and more teachers are using [social media around lessons](#), allowing students to [use their cell phones](#) to do research and participate in class, and developing their [curriculum around projects](#) to ground learning around an activity. These strategies are all part of a larger goal to help students connect to social and cultural spaces.

And it's part of what defines "participatory learning," coined by University of Southern California Annenberg Professor [Henry Jenkins](#), who published his first article on the topic "[Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture](#)," in 2006. His work sprang out of the desire to understand the grassroots nature of creativity, how projects are being shared online and what an increasingly networked culture looks like. Since then, he and a team of researchers at [USC's Annenberg Innovation Lab](#) have been trying to understand the skills that young people need to creatively participate in a networked world.

In an effort to change how American schools think about teaching, Jenkins' team developed a strategy called [PLAY](#) (Participatory Learning and You) to explain the exploratory and experimental approach to teaching they think students would benefit from. The team worked with teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District, and recently

released a series of studies that describe what they found.

“PLAY describes a mode of experimentation, of testing materials, trying out new solutions, exploring new horizons,” Jenkins said. It’s how kids interact with games – throwing themselves in without reading the rules, testing the limits and feeling free to try and fail. But this learning style is hard to achieve in a system ruled by high-stakes testing where there is no room for students to fail. Everything they do goes on their academic record and they have become unaccustomed to experimenting.

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Ed-tech has claimed a noisy role in the debate about how to engage kids with class work, but it isn’t the only way, he said. The ed-tech movement is one part of the participatory learning that Jenkins discusses, but there are other ways to help kids develop skills that will allow them to creatively connect with a culture that’s increasingly networked.

“It’s about a shift in how they think rather than thinking that tech is going to save them or that they need to learn all these tools in order to play, in order to experiment and tinker,” said [Erin Reilly](#), the project’s research director who has led efforts to work with teachers on developing specific strategies for teaching kids ways to collaborate, problem-solve and think creatively.

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What defines the PLAY strategy are things like creativity, co-learning, engagement and motivation, making learning relevant, and thinking of education as an ecosystem, where the connections between school, home, community and the broader world are all equally important. Using those principles, the goal is to teach skills students will need in the outside world — things like exercising sound judgment.

“We’ve always wanted young people to critically engage with the information around them,” Jenkins said. “That takes on more urgency in an age of networked communication,” he said. Other skills have risen out of the technology’s influence, like the ability to visualize knowledge and understand visual information. Other skills, like multi-tasking and networking, have been around for a long time, but aren’t always emphasized in traditional classrooms.

The skills that PLAY fosters are based on values that lie beneath the social and cultural experience of this generation, Jenkins said. Educators in Los Angeles who have been incorporating PLAY methods learned how deeply these ideas run in society, no longer worried as much about the specific technology they used to teach. Instead, they felt the freedom to try low-tech ways of getting at the same ideas. The tools were far less important than the tactics that served the learning goals.

One of the biggest challenges for teachers attempting to implement PLAY’s pedagogy is letting go of some of the control that teachers are taught to maintain over their classrooms. A teacher-centered approach can stifle the creative, experimental, and sometimes accidental learning that can be transformative.

“What we hear a lot is teachers describing our approaches as messy, as getting out of control,” Jenkins said. “But the teachers who let it get a little messy are finding something very powerful.” Students might not be learning exactly the same thing, but they involve themselves and their passions in the learning, instilling a sense of ownership. But an apparently uncontrolled classroom can be hard to explain to an administrator who drops in, making it feel risky to

teachers who are often alone in the fight to change public education.

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One teacher in the study had every intention of letting her students experiment in content, but had a harder time letting go of the format. She had her students create public service announcements on whatever topic felt relevant to them. Students spoke to their families and friends before picking topics they found meaningful. One group worked on depression and shared personal experiences as part of the process.

When it came time to create a project, the teacher wanted students to use PowerPoint, a tool *she* was familiar with, but let go of the idea and allowed them to make their projects on technology with which she was unfamiliar. Teacher and students learned together, each bringing something unique to the table. That type of co-learning is exactly what PLAY mentors feel needs to happen more often in classrooms.

But it's not easy to be the sole innovator in a school. "Teachers all over the country are fighting this fight alone," Jenkins said. "By putting our weight behind those teachers we can be a support to that evolution." The USC team knows that they are working with early adopters and that scalability will be difficult. Still the long term goal is to eliminate a common question heard from students, "when will I ever have to use this."

WHAT ABOUT ASSESSMENTS?

To gauge the impact of the PLAY program, the group performed a variety of assessments, including surveys, interviews, peer reflected videos. "In the test-driven environment of the contemporary classroom, there is hardly ever any free time," Reilly said. "Even in after-school programs, there is a strong push for evaluation, assessment, and continuation of the school day, leaving fewer opportunities for children to play, explore and use their imaginations."

Despite decades of calls for inquiry-based learning, many teachers find they have less time to experiment with open-learning practices, she added, and as a result, the goal to help learners develop 21st century skills is in direct opposition to the expectation that they teach to the test.

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So the group approached assessments in this way, Reilly said: "We understand the Common Core Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, but not how teachers should teach. We introduced teachers to new practices and ways of thinking about teaching. This, in turn was not to detract from addressing the requirement teachers have of preparing their students for the tests, but instead to give new practices that could result in perhaps more engaged students with material relevant to them so that the knowledge was gained in a different way — thus resulting in we hope better results for the tests."

For instance, one middle school science teacher, experimented with a new activity that required letting go: rather than leading his students to a solution, he allowed for unexpected outcomes as his students used their collective knowledge to understand and solve the problem. The teacher gave students an array of artifacts, such as plastic tubing, paper and tape, and asked them to create a physical representation of what they had learned about how the digestive system functions. He wanted to use this opportunity to explore assessment in collaborative learning settings, and to examine how peer-to-peer processes could foster deep learning.

In addition to the project, the teacher also implemented a traditional written test, asking them to sequentially identify how the digestive system works. More than 98 percent scored well, Reilly said.

“They used the time order transitional words correctly... and that is actually a California Standards Test question that they have to take at the end of this year,” the teacher said. From that point forward, students continued to suggest ways of applying the tools and resources around them to creatively and collaboratively engage in their assignments.

For more information, read [Designing With Teachers: Participatory to Professional Development in Education](#), [Shall We Play?](#) and [PLAY! Participatory Learning and You](#).