The Liberatory Play Toolkit

Welcome! In this toolkit, you will find twelve educational play activities, designed to serve as inspiration for you to create your own and try them out with your classroom. The purpose, to invite your students and yourself into a mindset of play and discovery; to encourage them to engage with your class topics in a more active, intentional way; to help them develop their own critical vision, and an understanding not only of your curriculum, but also of how its knowledge is constructed, deployed, and leveraged in the world.

Each play activity includes a description, some questions to consider when creating your own, an example activity, and recommendations for discussion, including important leading questions. For best use, make sure to take the following things into account:

No Wrong Answers!

While doing these activities, remember that the central purpose is students' discovery of your topic. As such, there are no wrong answers or solutions, and all contributions must be taken and analyzed in with a mindset of openness and curiosity. By allowing the students to explore without the pressure of being correct, you can help them develop their own tools for assessing what is right and what is wrong.

Always Participate!

For maximum benefit, you should involve yourself as actively as any other student in your activities. If you're doing a play, play a character. If you're doing a dance party, dance along with them. By participating fully, you will gain better understanding of how the students experience the activities and arrive at their own insight. Moreover, your involvement in the activity will invite students to participate more wholeheartedly.

Most importantly:

Stop using this toolkit!

Eventually, you will find that some things included here will work better than others within your subject and context. Great! Take whatever is useful to you from here, and abandon the rest. As you gain experience designing playful interactions with your students, you'll find that you don't need these play activities as much. So, by all means, stop using them and carry on with your own practice.

That's it! Have fun!

Always Discuss!

Without time to reflect, no activity leads to insight or knowledge. So, dedicate time during and after each activity to discuss your reflections collectively with the class. Hearing others' insights, students will be able to compare and contrast them with their own. Again, make sure to participate! As you will have experienced the activity will them, contribute as if you were one more, and bring to bear your experience and knowledge through open discussion rather than through lecturing. The leading questions included with each play activity can serve as starting points for meaningful discussion.

Don't pay attention to the examples!

While each activity includes an example lesson, these were generated using Generative AI and a simple prompt, as a showcase of the most basic inspiration the tool can provide. As such, these example activities are not high bars to aim to, but rather low bars to start from. The sky is the limit!

You might have seen something like this before...

That's great! Play and playfulness already exist in many schools and educational settings around the world, and there are countless activities out there that have successfully invited students to play in the past. Thus, when you find that one of the cards here is reminiscent of an activity you have conducted, or seen, or heard about, think about how the resources on the play cards could help make it even more engaging, or how the discussion questions suggested here could illuminate new aspects of the existing activity.

Iterate and Grow!

No two applications of a single activity are the same. So, pay attention to what works and what doesn't as you conduct new play activities, and reflect on how to make them better for next time you try them out. No activity is born perfect, but if you keep trying out new things, your activities will get better!

Artist

Artist

Embark on a creative project: create artwork (visual, video, music, writing, etc.) based on or informed by your topic.

Consider

Should the artwork be created individually or in teams? What materials are accessible to your class and will allow your students to create freely?

Discuss

Show the artwork generated in class to each other. Use it as a starting point for conversation about your topic.

Leading Questions

- How are different perspectives into your topic addressed by different pieces?

- How does the need to produce artwork influence the students' understanding of the topic?

Athlete

Athlete

Explore your topic through physical activity. Have your students discover and experience the topic through movement (running, jumping, etc) or sensory experience (touching, smelling, etc).

Consider

Is your activity safe and accessible for your students? How would they normally encounter your topic in the world? Can this be reproduced physically or sensorially?

Discuss

Reflect on how the physical or sensory experience impacts your collective understanding of the topic.

Leading Questions

- How does the physical experience match or diverge from theoretical understanding of the concepts?

- How can physical experience be abstracted into conceptual knowledge?

Explorer

Explorer

Have your students research new facts, news, opinions, or applications related to the topic, and connect them to different aspects of it.

Consider

What are the sources where your students usually find knowledge? How could you encourage them to find new sources of knowledge, that will present information different to shat they usually encounter?

Discuss

Present to each other the new information that has been discovered. Reflect on how source and research process informs how facts are encountered and perceived.

Leading Questions

- How do sources differentiate which information they present as opinion and which as fact?

- What are the interests of the sources documenting this knowledge, and how does it influence the way they present information?

Inventor

Inventor

Have your students come up with new products, solutions or creations using knowledge from your topic.

Consider

How can your topic be interpreted to create new solutions to old problems? What are existing examples of products and solutions that utilize knowledge from your topic?

Discuss

Present your concepts and creations to each other. Discuss their usefulness, creativity, feasibility, and analyze how knowledge from your topic is leveraged in them.

Leading Questions

- How have the problems these products solve been solved before?

- How do different interpretations of the topic lead to different solutions?

Explorer

For Example

Exploring Literary Modernism through Gender and Race

In this lesson, students will explore literary modernism by researching the ways in which gender and race are represented in modernist literature. They will connect modernist literature to the social and cultural issues of the time.

- Begin by introducing the concept of literary modernism and its characteristics.
- Ask students to research how gender and race are represented in modernist literature.
- Have students create presentations or essays that showcase the connections they found between modernist literature and gender and race.

Discussion Questions

- How do gender and race intersect with modernist literature?
- What new sources of knowledge did you use to research this topic, and how did they differ from your usual sources?
- How does understanding the representation of gender and race in modernist literature enhance our understanding of the literature itself?

Inventor

For Example

Sustainable Agriculture Innovation Challenge

In this lesson, students will explore how the carbon cycle relates to agriculture and food production. They will develop a new product or solution that promotes sustainable agriculture practices.

- Introduce the concept of the carbon cycle and explain how it relates to agriculture.
- Each group must develop a new product or solution that promotes sustainable agriculture practices and reduces greenhouse gas emissions.
- Have each group present their product or solution to the class, explaining how it works and how it leverages knowledge from the carbon cycle.

Discussion Questions

-How can sustainable agriculture practices help reduce greenhouse gas emissions? What role does the carbon cycle play in this process?

- What are some challenges associated with implementing sustainable agriculture practices on a large scale? How can your group's solution help address these challenges?
- What are some trade-offs between maximizing food production and minimizing greenhouse gas emissions in agriculture?

Artist

For Example

Trigonometry Photography

Students will use photography to demonstrate the concept of angle of elevation.

- Introduce the concept of angle of elevation and how it is used in trigonometry.
- Divide students into pairs or small groups and provide them with digital cameras or smartphones.
- Instruct students to take photographs that demonstrate the concept of angle of elevation (e.g. a person looking up at a tall building, a bird flying overhead).
- After completing their photographs, students will present and explain their work to the class, highlighting the trigonometric concepts they included and how they are related.

Discussion questions

- How did the photographs help to demonstrate the concept of angle of elevation?
- How did the need to produce artwork influence the students' understanding of the topic?
- How do different photographic techniques contribute to the understanding of the topic?

Athlete

For Example

The Cell Cycle Dance Party

Students will create in a dance party where each dance move represents a different stage of the cell cycle.

- Create a playlist that includes songs that match the different stages of the cell cycle (e.g. "G1 - Waiting on the World to Change" by John Mayer, "S - DNA" by Kendrick Lamar, "G2 - Let's Get Physical" by Olivia Newton-John, "M - Jump" by Van Halen, "Cytokinesis - Celebration" by Kool & The Gang).
- Have the class listen to each song and identify which stage of the cell cycle it represents.
- Have the class create a dance move that represents each stage of the cell cycle.
- Start the dance party and have the class dance through the different stages of the cell cycle to the playlist.

Discussion Questions

- How did the dance moves represent the different stages of the cell cycle?
- Were there any challenges that arose during the dance party that relate to the challenges cells face during the cell cycle?
- How can this physical experience help us remember the different stages of the cell cycle?

Detective

Detective

Have your students reconstruct your topic from basic principles and their own experiences.

Consider

Is it possible for them to reach this knowledge on their own? What extra knowledge or experience would facilitate them being able to do so, and how could they get it?

Discuss

Reflect on the challenges of reconstructing knowledge from your students' experience and first principles. Explore how these two sources of basic knowledge are more or less useful for this particular topic.

Leading Questions

- How do the particulars of the topic change based on the experiences of the individuals that reconstruct it?
- If it is possible to reach different conclusions from this exercise, who is considered to be right?

Hunter

Hunter

Have your students look for instances of your topic in their own environments and document their findings.

Consider

How can your topic be observed in the world? How can it be documented and shown to others?

Discuss

Create a gallery of instances of your topic and reflect on how each of the instances found represent it. Explore how knowledge was used when creating each particular instance.

Leading Questions

- How similar are the different documented instances and how do they reflect each hunter's particular understanding of the topic?
- How does each instance reflect or contradict theoretical knowledge?

Actor

Actor

Simulate with your students a real-life situation where your topic is used or explored. Your students can take on different roles to experience different perspectives into your topic.

Consider

How is your topic approached outside of school and by professionals? Who are stakeholders in those situations, and what are their goals and intentions?

Discuss

Reflect on how adopting the role of stakeholders, with specific goals and interests, affects understanding of a theoretical topic.

Leading Questions

- How does the need to apply knowledge in a practical setting affect theoretical understanding of it?
- How do people's different goals and interests affect how they interpret this topic?

Dreamer

Dreamer

Imagine with your students what would happen if the knowledge in your topic where different. Explore the consequences this would have in the world.

Consider

How could your topic be meaningfully different? What aspects of the world would also be different in consequence?

Discuss

Reflect with your students on your imagined world. Explore how the relationships between your topic and the real world are evidenced by imagining a different version of it.

Leading Questions

- How would the topic need to change to create a meaningful effect in an imagined world?
- What are unexpected impacts this change would have in the world?

Actor

For Example

Alliances in World War I

In this lesson, students will simulate a diplomatic negotiation between the European powers over the formation of alliances. Each student will represent a different European power, with the goal of securing the best alliances.

- Introduce the concept of alliances and their role in the lead-up to World War I.
- Assign each student a different European power to represent.
- Give each student time to research their assigned power and its alliances.
- Conduct a simulated diplomatic negotiation where students try to secure the best alliances for their power.
- Conclude the activity by discussing the real-world consequences of the alliance system.

Discussion Questions

- How did the simulation change your understanding of alliances and their role in World War I?
- How did the goals and interests of the different European powers influence their decisions during the simulation?
- How did the alliance system contribute to the outbreak of World War I?

Dreamer

For Example

The impact of the Cold War on culture and society

Overall activity: Students will imagine a world where the Cold War did not occur and discuss the impact of this change on culture and society.

- Introduce the concept of the Cold War and its impact on culture and society.
- Ask students to imagine a world where the Cold War did not occur and discuss how culture and society may have been different in this alternate reality.
- Have students discuss in groups the implications of this change, including how international relations and political ideology influenced art, literature, and entertainment during the Cold War.
- Ask groups to present their ideas to the class.

Discussion questions

- How did the Cold War influence culture and society during the time period?
- What cultural and societal developments may not have occurred without the Cold War?
- How did the conflict shape artistic expression and entertainment?
- Could cultural and societal developments have occurred differently without the Cold War?

Detective

For Example

Solving Quadratic Equations by Completing the Square

The class will work together to solve a series of quadratic equations by completing the square, leading them to discover the quadratic formula.

- Start by introducing the concept of quadratic equations and the idea of completing the square to solve them.
- Provide an example quadratic equation and guide the class through the process of completing the square to solve it.
- Have the class work in small groups to solve a set of quadratic equations using the completing the square method.
- As a class, discuss the patterns and steps involved in completing the square, and how it can be used to solve quadratic equations.
- Introduce the quadratic formula and have the class derive it by looking for patterns in the solutions they found using completing the square.

Discussion Questions

- What did you find challenging or confusing about completing the square to solve quadratic equations?
- How did you use patterns or prior knowledge to help you solve the equations?

Hunter

For Example

The Industrial Revolution and the Environment

In this lesson, students will look for instances of the industrial revolution and its impact on the environment in their own environment and document their findings.

- Begin with a brief lecture on the impact of the industrial revolution on the environment.
- Ask students to look for instances of environmental pollution or degradation in their local environment, such as air pollution or deforestation.
- Instruct them to document their findings through photographs or videos and explain how each instance relates to the industrial revolution and its environmental impact.
- Organize a class discussion where students can share their findings and create a gallery of instances of environmental pollution or degradation.

Discussion Questions

- What were the main environmental problems caused by the industrial revolution?
- How did industrialization change the relationship between humans and the environment?
- How can we address the environmental challenges of the industrial revolution and its aftermath?

Volunteer

Volunteer

Have your students help others working in areas related to your topic. This can be with professionals, members of their community, or even other students!

Consider

What kind of applications does your topic have outside the classroom, and who does them? What support role could students take that would enable them to assist meaningfully in the work of others?

Discuss

Reflect on how supporting others' work enhances the students' understanding of the topic. Explore how classroom knowledge is applied practically by different groups.

Leading Questions

- How did the people the students' were volunteering with understand the topic differently from how it is presented in the classroom?

- How do different understandings of the topic create different work practices?

Rebel

Rebel

Break your topic! With your students, explore how you could subvert, deny, and challenge the received and canonical knowledge of your topic.

Consider

What are weaknesses in how your topic is usually approached or used? How can these weaknesses be challenged and exploited meaningfully?

Discuss

Reflect with your students on how challenging your topic reveals what pieces of received knowledge can be dismantled, and which cannot. Explore the effect that subversion has on understanding the canonical knowledge received in school.

Leading Questions

- How crucial are the challenged aspects of your topic to its canonical understanding?

- How does dismantling certain ideas affect our understanding of what remains?

Gardener

Gardener

Leverage your topic's knowledge to build or grow something with your students. This can be nurturing a plant, building a model, or even using a digital simulation to make something new.

Consider

How is your topic used in the world to build and grow structures, systems, plants, etc? Which of these processes can be explored meaningfully using materials or programs accessible to your students?

Discuss

Reflect on how the exercise of creating or growing something confirms or denies your topic's knowledge. Explore how understanding of theoretical knowledge changes as it is applied to make something.

Leading Questions

- How is this topic directly useful when building or growing something?

- What, if any, knowledge in this topic is negated or cannot be confirmed by this exercise?

Comedian

Comedian

Make fun of your topic! With your students, come up with jokes that include or poke fun at the canonical knowledge included in your topic.

Consider

What aspects of your topic can be interpreted as funny or ridiculous? How are the serious, canonical interpretations of your topic structured, and how can they be exposed?

Discuss

Reflect with your students on how making fun of your topic reveals the strengths and flaws of the canonical interpretations of it. Question the jokes themselves, and explore what makes them funny given knowledge of your topic.

Leading Questions

- How does presenting knowledge as ridiculous affect how we interpret it?

- Does making fun of this topic reveal any flaws hidden when it is presented seriously?

Gardener

For Example

Building a Trellis

In this lesson, students will build a trellis for a plant using basic statics principles. They will learn about the forces acting on the trellis and how to make it stable.

- Introduce the concept of forces acting on a structure, including tension and compression.
- Show students different types of trellises and explain how they work.
- Divide students into groups and give them materials to build a trellis.
- Have students test their trellises and make adjustments as needed.
- Discuss the results as a class and explain the principles of stability and balance.

Discussion Questions

- What are the different forces acting on a trellis?
- How can you make a trellis stable?
- How can these principles be applied to other structures?

Comedian

For Example

Exploring Literary Analysis through Humor

In this lesson, students will learn how to analyze literature by creating comedic interpretations of a classic text.

- Choose a classic text that is well-known to the class, such as Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet or Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice.
- Discuss the basic elements of the story, such as characters, setting, and plot.
- Brainstorm humorous interpretations of these elements, such as "What if Romeo was a werewolf?" or "What if Mr. Darcy was secretly a superhero?"
- In small groups, have students develop one comedic interpretation into a short essay, using evidence from the text to support their argument.
- Share and discuss the essays as a class, analyzing the use of humor to reframe the text.

Discussion Questions

- How did creating a comedic interpretation change your understanding of the text?
- What themes or ideas in the original text were emphasized or subverted by your humorous interpretation?
- Can humor be used to make serious literature more accessible, or does it trivialize important themes?

Volunteer

For Example

Supply and Demand in Action

Students will volunteer at a local food bank and assist with inventory management and distribution. They will learn about how supply and demand affect the availability of food for those in need.

- Introduce the concepts of supply and demand, using examples from everyday life such as popular toys or fashion trends.
- Explain how supply and demand can also affect the availability of food.
- Organize a visit to a local food bank where students can volunteer their time and learn about how supply and demand affects the availability of food.
- Have students work with the food bank staff to manage inventory and distribution, while observing how supply and demand affects the availability of different types of food.

Discussion Questions:

- How did the students' experiences at the food bank illustrate the concept of supply and demand?
- How did the food bank staff's understanding of supply and demand differ from how it is presented in the classroom?
- What are some other ways supply and demand affect the availability of goods and services in our communities?

Rebel

For Example

Democracy Through the Lens of Power Structures

Students will subvert the traditional understanding of democracy by examining how power structures influence democratic societies.

- Introduce the concept of democracy and its significance in modern societies.
- Provide examples of power structures, such as social class, gender, and race.
- Break students into small groups and assign each group a power structure to research and analyze.
- In their groups, students will create a presentation that explores how their assigned power structure affects democracy and democratic societies.
- Presentations will be shared with the class and discussed as a whole.

Discussion Questions

- How do power structures influence democratic societies?
- What are some weaknesses in the traditional understanding of democracy that power structures expose?
- How might a different interpretation of democracy affect our understanding of modern societies?