

# Introduction

Innovation, invention, and unconventional thinking readily associate themselves with art learning and artmaking, but the reality is that artmaking in the classroom and the artist's studio can fail to live up to these descriptors. As art educators, we desire to see students experiment and approach ideas from new perspectives, but we often struggle with how to achieve this state of affairs. My experience as an art instructor has been no different. Swaying students from shallow, obvious, stereotypical thinking has always been a challenge. This issue came to a head after I began to structure student artmaking around big ideas as a method for focusing artmaking on meaning making.<sup>1</sup> I am still an advocate for overtly designing student artmaking as a pursuit of ideas, but experience taught me that more was needed.

As I observed students working with big ideas from personal and social perspectives, I realized that many students' artworks remained at the level of prevailing and established understandings. It appeared easier for students to question and delve into ideas in class discussions than in their artmaking. When it came time to use ideas for artmaking, techniques and formal issues seemed to dominate students' efforts rather than the exploration of

ideas. Noticeable was a tendency to predetermine results, a strategy which often resulted in conventional imagery. There wasn't a sense of the visual process suggesting possibilities for taking ideas in new directions during or after artmaking. It all seemed too predictable, predicated upon the familiar. This observation is, of course, a generalization, and there were always exceptions, but the absence of employing the visual process to explore ideas in new and unexpected ways seemed to be a common problem.

This instructional experience led me to rethink how I might design student artmaking in ways that would encourage students to delve more substantively into ideas as they made artworks. I recognized that something needed to change in the artmaking process itself. The challenge was to engage students with artmaking in ways that fostered surprise, curiosity, and a drive toward new ways of thinking. But how could students learn to work in this manner?

I surmised that dislodging the expected and familiar represented a first step. Knowledge certainly benefits artmaking, but there also needs to be a motivation to question the already known. After experimenting with

instructional design in which play became a component of the students' artmaking, I began to recognize the potential of play as an agent for displacing the predictable and familiar. Although play was an essential feature of my own artmaking—an assumed behavior—I realized that I wasn't seeing a lot of play in student artmaking. As a pedagogical experiment, I focused more on bringing play into the students' artmaking process, not to make artmaking more entertaining, but to address my concern with teaching students to use artmaking as an opportunity for delving deeper into ideas.

I recall an early instructional experiment in which students were told to purchase five random items from the local dollar store without prior knowledge as to how the items would be used. In class, we laid the items out on a bedsheet on the floor, forming a communal collection. Students chose a big idea such as identity, loss, conflict, and so forth, then selected three items from the dollar store collection to incorporate into their artwork. The experience was playful in that students' purchased dollar store items based on an unknown big idea successfully combined with the assorted collection to present an array of possibilities that triggered new thinking. Sending the students

to the dollar store without knowledge of how they would use the purchased items was a significant play strategy. This initial play strategy placed the students in a zone of not knowing exactly how they would proceed with their artmaking. Artists who play create similar strategies that foster circumstances of not knowing exactly how they will proceed. Students had to invent their own ways of working and were pressed to think more rigorously about their selected big ideas. The change in the students' artmaking was noticeable enough to persuade me that play could be a potent conceptual tool for artmaking.

The specifics of the other play assignments in this experimental course have since faded, but the impact motivated me to continue researching play for artmaking, not as a form of novelty or entertainment, but as an intellectual tool. The present text emerges from these experiments utilizing play as a conceptual strategy to facilitate students with thinking differently, beyond obvious and conventional thought. Although my work has been with undergraduate and graduate students, the approach has strong potential for students at all levels. In-service and pre-service art teachers in my courses readily recognized the

potential of play to stimulate new thinking in their students.

An extensive literature surrounds play, theorizing located in education, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, psychology, and game studies. While I have drawn upon this body of work, it has been in a highly selective manner, laying hold of concepts that resonate with classroom artmaking. This approach led me to highlight six types of play and delineate the text chapters through them. These are *nonsense play*, *physical play*, *experimental play*, *social play*, *participatory play*, and *chance play*. Additionally, I have identified three attributes to shape the discussions of play and artmaking in each of these chapters. They are *play as reality-based*, *play as paradoxical*, and *play as attitudinal*. As background, Chapter 1 briefly elaborates on how these features of play can serve student artmaking.

## Comparing Artmaking and Play

Artmaking and play are similar in that both are usually involved with physical actions and materials, can be conducted through individual or group participation, promote high levels

of engagement, are governed by rules and procedures, and are subject to chance happenings that may change the course of events. Despite the commonalities, a notable difference exists between play and artmaking. Play is generally process-oriented, while artmaking is more often product-driven. I should note that game play, based on winning and losing, differs and is product-driven; the type of play I have in mind should be labeled free play.

Broadly, play is about itself and the experience. Play scholar Michael Sicart contends, "Play is *autotelic*, an activity with its own purpose."<sup>2</sup> Artmaking can aspire to this condition, but final results and products are part of the equation, unlike the greater independence of play. This is not to suggest that art products should be ignored, but to submit that, in the long run, the products will become stronger if the process itself assumes value. Artists must adopt such an attitude if they are to shape their practice in experimental ways; otherwise, the creation of a certain type of product becomes the dominating factor—often eliminating, to a large degree, risk-taking and experimentation. The same can occur in the classroom, where play strategies and a playful attitude can promote an exploratory approach without undue concern for outcomes.