

TRAINING FOR CHANGE

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Taking Play Seriously

By Hannah Strange

As a trainer and organizational development consultant to various social justice and environmental groups, I take my responsibility to play very seriously.

Unfortunately, when I use my role as a trainer to invite groups to play-- through ice-breakers, games, skits or other kinesthetic activities—the opportunity is often met with groans and eye-rolling. “What does acting like a chicken have to do with learning to be a trainer?” people grumble. “Role plays aren’t the same as real life!” they cry. “Can’t we just sit down and talk about it?” “We don’t have time for this. We need to get back to work.”

I think this reflects an activist culture where playfulness is frequently sidelined. In our frenzy to address the issues we care about, we reduce our breaks to three-minute scrambles for coffee and the bathroom. We eat lunch at our desks. In trainings or meetings we half-heartedly play a name game and then dive right into our planned content. At best, playfulness is marginalized as a style of expression of the sillier people in a group, or used as a quick re-energizer in between grueling sessions of “real work.” At worst, it is ignored all together.

I think we’re doing ourselves a huge disservice by abandoning playfulness. I would argue that far from being just a source of fun, play has huge benefits to us as learners, organizers, and activists. Playfulness feeds creativity and positivity, which in the long term helps us to be more effective and more sustainable. Those qualities are essential to success in our work for human rights, the environment and social justice.

Playfulness Increases Creativity

Last year I helped to lead a training for activists called, *No More Marches and Rallies; Building Power Through Creative Tactics*. We started the workshop with an improv game where pairs of people created a string of outrageous possibilities that built off of each other’s ideas using the bridge phrase, “Yes! And...”. One person might start with, “Let’s go to the store and buy ten gallons of ice cream,” and the other person would respond, “Yes! And let’s buy bunches of bananas too so we can have banana splits.” The exchange continues back and forth, getting sillier each time, until eventually they have a dessert banquet with elephants and astronauts in attendance.

One way to think of this is play as engagement, one of two types of play that facilitate creativity. Play as engagement includes a number of playful approaches to doing our work, like simulations, role-plays, contests and skits, that help us develop and flex our creative muscles. Specifically, play as engagement pushes us to think more expansively, combine concepts in novel ways, frame problems in fresh light, experiment with new skills and explore new ideas, and motivates us to tackle challenges. In the case of this workshop, the game we used freed people up to imagine fresh tactics without sliding into the nay-saying and critiquing that often accompanies brainstorming.

Another example of play as engagement shows up in Training for Change’s workshop, *Creative Workshop Design*. We use a winding human-sized board game to help participants overcome their mental blocks to being creative in training settings. Small teams are set to work developing new training tools or finding ways to work with groups in innovative ways. As each team solves a challenge they move forward along the game board.

I remember one team that had an incredibly hard time getting out of the starting square. For half an hour they struggled, frustrated by the task they were given and hoping we would take mercy on them and let them move forward. We held firm. Finally, one team member got everyone on their feet, built an imaginary brick wall that represented the team's emotional hurdle, and encouraged each teammate to charge through it and break down the barrier. Inspired, they found several clever solutions and got to advance along the board. By making a game out of solving common problems trainers face, we helped these participants rise to the challenge and think more creatively than they would have in normal conversation.

The second type of play, play as diversion, increases creativity by helping us develop a nurturing social context. Through diversionary play, we step out of our typical roles and break down hierarchical boundaries, form stronger relationships and build community. The result is that we feel psychological safety to try new things and be creative. Diversionary play also allows us the mental breaks we need to relax and restore ourselves and incubate ideas without the pressure to produce. In a training situation, this could be structured icebreakers and energizer games, or it could be informally supported by having toys on hand or encouraging doodling.

One year, at Training for Change's annual *Advanced Training of Trainers* the facilitators noticed the group falling into a very reserved way of interacting with one another that felt strained. Sensing that it might be coming from a social pressure to be respectful and polite around them as elder trainers, they decided to put the afternoon session on hold and take us to the park to play. As a participant, I led a round of a favorite children's game I learned in England called Giants, Wizards, Elves. As I watched my 70 year old mentor act the part of a mythical creature and then run and tumble his way across the field, I saw another side of him that later freed me from my previously closed attitude and allowed me to bring more of myself into the training. This is a classic example of how play as diversion can break down social barriers to creativity.

How does this make us more effective and sustainable?

We are constantly faced with new affronts on our communities and the environment as corporations and governments come up with cunning ways to extract resources, pollute our air and water, display military power, and violate human rights. Play keeps us flexible and evolving. By playing, we can break out of the ritualized tactics and movement silos we've known for decades and discover more effective, collaborative approaches that will help us stay relevant in the ever-changing landscape of social and environmental justice.

Positivity, one of the central aspects of playfulness and a major trigger of creativity, is the key. Barbara Fredrickson of the University of Michigan places positivity at the center of an alternative theory to the well-known "Fight or Flight" view of human survival that she names "Broaden and Build." Positive emotions widen the range of thoughts and actions we consider in a given situation, which means we're more creative and flexible with our responses. In the long-term, broadened mindsets build "enduring personal resources, like social connections, coping strategies, and environmental knowledge." The positive feelings we get from playing may feel short-lived, but they contribute to our growth and resilience in a lasting and non-linear way. Finally, play keeps us grounded in our passion and motivation for this work because it makes it fun, fresh, and helps us de-compress.

With all that's at stake, I believe that trainers, organizers, anyone working with groups focused on social change, should prioritize making play a part of the work, not an after-thought. Making the work fun while taking our purpose seriously is a way that we can support the sustainability of the people we work with and inspire new people to join us in the (playful) struggle.

How can you cultivate playfulness and creativity as a trainer?

The important thing to remember is that play is not necessarily a set of activities but rather the approach you take to doing something: when you play you allow yourself to abandon the search for an efficient way to meet a goal and choose instead to turn ends into means. Play looks different to each person and in each group. While I think it's best to find the right kind of playfulness for your context, there are qualities that trainers can cultivate to make an environment in which creativity and playfulness thrive. Here are a few key considerations:

Set aside time and space where playfulness encouraged & protected. People need psychological and physical space to feel safe enough to play. Find ways to build temporary boundaries in which people can play and be creative.

Make it ok to fail. A major reason people avoid experimenting and innovating is that they're afraid of the consequences of failing—whether that's losing face, losing a job, or losing something of deep importance to their organization or community. Find social ways to cue to your group that trial and error is accepted and encouraged, that mistakes are a source of learning.

Above all, keep it positive. Embrace a “Yes! And...” attitude. Affirm people's new ideas and experimentation. Be curious, ask good questions, and listen for novelty. Encourage people to appreciate each other's strengths. Create beautiful physical spaces where people can relax and enjoy themselves. Positive emotions facilitate creativity, resilience and long-term sustainability.

Resources:

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