First Steps to Playful Pedagogy

Playful Pedagogy entails an endless and satisfying journey of discovery, which for many practitioners is about true teaching.

**A Learning Adventure** is a useful metaphor for playful pedagogical teaching plans and lessons, and for distinguishing it from more traditional educational approaches.

The goal of the adventure is to facilitate experiences which enable your class, and every individual child within it, to determine their own learning goals and pathways while remaining within the CFE framework.

Before starting, it is important to familiarise yourself with the two main threads you will be weaving in:

1. **The unique needs, capacities and interests of your pupils.** This will help you design an adventure which motivates all, where each child feels valued, enabled and supported, and plan how you may need to allocate your time.

2. **All Stages 0-1 CfE experiences and outcomes.** This will give you a mental map for planning meaningful and motivating topics for your class, and being responsive to change when your adventure takes interesting new directions or detours.

It can be difficult to turn back once you’ve had your first adventure, as there is always more to learn and new paths to follow.

**Designing your first Learning Adventure.** Below is a Figure and some overarching questions which provide a tool for thinking and reflecting on the design of your first adventure, and on the interactions (i.e. the learning processes) involved.

The Design Triangle is where you start, and the Process Triangle are the learning interactions which occur as your adventure pans out. The “scaffolding” of your experience is what connects the two, i.e. the topic, provocation and challenge that gets your adventure going.
Experiences. What CfE experience and outcomes could provide a motivating topic, provocation and challenge for an open-ended learning adventure (or vice versa)?

Spaces. What qualities of the physical setting and materials could enable and support individual motivation, curiosity and creativity during our adventure?

Interactions. What learning processes could be involved in the experience, and to what extent will and should the adventure and interactions be influenced by the child, an adult, or by the scaffolding (i.e. the topic, provocation and challenge)?

Experiences. One approach to designing your first adventure is to do it around a specific CfE experience, as this may make learning experiences and outcomes clearer and easier to discern. You could think of, or discuss with your class, a motivating topic, provocation and challenge, which might provide the subject of a CfE experience, or a particular one you have chosen.

Many E&Os in stage 0 already mention play, and those in stages 1 and 2 that involve words such as ‘create’, ‘recreate’, ‘explore’, ‘experiment’ and ‘choose’ are also ripe candidates for teaching playfully. As your knowledge and confidence grow you may choose to design adventures which integrate multiple CfE experiences, or just set out on one and see what experiences emerge.

Spaces. The quality of an adventure’s setting and materials is determined by the number of meaningful choices for independent activity they afford to each child. The more choices inherent in the space, the easier it is for each child to find novel ways to explore and collaborate within the topic, and at levels of challenge appropriate to them. When all are so enabled, you’ll have a motivated and engaged class – a
learning engine where each participant (including you) contributes to and learns from the activity together, at the same time.

**The key requirements for a high-quality space are:**

- It capitalises on individual children's interests and motivations.
- The **setting** is rich in affordances, i.e. it can enable lots of different types of **movement**, and at appropriate levels of challenge and risk, for each child (running, climbing, hiding, jumping, building, manipulation). At the bottom of our [Getting Started](#) page, you will find a simple **Setting Richness / Play Autonomy Assessment** tool. This can help you evaluate the degree to which your setting, and planned activities within it, might enable or constrain the range of children's play possibilities.
- The **materials** are ‘non-prescriptive’, meaning that the imagination can turn each element to many things, e.g. a stick can be a pencil, a wand, a hoover, a microphone, or for construction; whereas a toy car is only what it is. **Loose materials** are ideal for this reason, and our [Play Scotland’s Loose Parts Toolkit](#) can help you think about how to use these to enable particular play types.

Rich **outdoor environments**, particularly woodland, satisfy all these requirements **for free**, and there is a growing weight of evidence that they are the ideal playful pedagogical space, with remarkable impacts on wellbeing, attainment and collaboration compared to indoor classrooms. One easy first adventure (from one of our case studies) would be to allow your class 15-30 minutes free play outdoors before school starts, then think about what CfE experiences might be relevant to the behaviours and interests you observe.

**Interactions.** While the **first principle** of playful pedagogy is to **nurture the capacity of each child to determine their own learning goals and pathways**, curricular objectives mean any adventure necessarily entails some degree of adult facilitation.

The second ‘process’ triangle in the Figure above provides a useful way of thinking and reflecting upon this. Every adventure, and interaction it involves, might be represented by a dot somewhere within this triangle which is determined by the extent to which the experience is influenced by the child, or by you, or by “scaffolding”, i.e. the topic, provocation and challenge designed to facilitate progress within the curricular framework. Furthermore, school-starters are likely to have diverse learning and support needs, and therefore, the triangle can also be thought of as applying to groups with similar specific challenges, as well as to individual children and to the class as a whole.
It is quite alright for you to initiate and suggest learning experiences, as long as you remain sensitive to the child’s response and mindful that your intent and agenda is not violating the first principle.

**Some questions to ask yourself about your interactions when designing and experiencing your adventure:**

- Am I participating in and supporting their learning journeys or leading them? Are my interactions enabling or constraining their autonomy?
- Are my interventions extending or narrowing the scope of their individual inquiry and thinking?
- Are we working together to solve problems and clarify concepts, or am I teaching and showing them?
- Are they becoming more or less motivated, engaged, stressed and collaborative as a result of my involvement?
- Am I listening and trying to understand where they want to take their experience? Or am I trying to steer it according to predetermined outcomes or ideas of the right or wrong way of doing things?
- Am I contributing to and supporting the integrity and diversity of their adventure from within, or interfering with it by referring to it from an outside perspective?
- Am I giving them enough breadth, depth, space and time to be creative and curious, and where might our adventure go if I gave them more?
- Do they or I have control of the conversation? Are they describing and commenting on their own learning, or am I?

It is natural for your first adventures to feel chaotic and strange (see #Play4P1 case study). Many practitioners struggle at first with what feels like a loss of control compared with what they’re used to. However, be patient, learn to trust and let go, and new ways of working and learning together soon emerge between you and the children.

Sometimes scaffolding and interactions can only be led by you. However, ordinarily, there are ways an adventure’s design and processes can be developed through negotiation and co-creation with your class, thereby increasing their motivation and sense of ownership.

**3. Observing and Assessing your Learning Adventure**

It is difficult to ‘see’ the richness and depth of children’s learning during an adventure. However, here are **four key indicators** to look for in individual children and the class as a whole:

- They are engaged in and intrinsically-motivated by their activity
• They are confident and unstressed
• They are collaborating spontaneously, creatively and productively
• Activities and projects are child-led and self-sustaining, where you are a capable participant, not a manager or director

Of these the first two are paramount. The Leuven scale of wellbeing and involvement provides a simple way of measuring both. By building your adventure around a specific CfE experience, it will give you a clearer focus on how to represent and measure outcomes. However, effective and efficient reporting on Playful Pedagogy requires a reorientation of approaches to paperwork around best practice, which is discussed under ‘Playful Pedagogy across the School’ and the Garnetbank Primary School case study.