Reflections on a preschool penny arcade

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PRESCHOOL PENNY ARCADE

by Genan Anderson

The bright sign near the entry announces: "Preschool Penny Arcade." Inside are clusters of children—quiet and intent, cheering and clapping, laughing and giggling.

At the center of one group are Stephen and Lisa demonstrating their ring-toss game. At another are Daniel and Jill and a bean-bag toss. Another group is playing a memory game with Bobby. Other children are playing a board game with Kayla.

The eye quickly sees the games are child-made. With closer observation, it is clear the children are directing the action. They are in charge of the rules!

How did this arcade appear in a college student lounge? Could it just as easily have been in an extended living center, elementary school library, or high school homemaking lab?

We decided to let the interests of the children direct our project topic under investigation. Somehow our study of pets had led into animal hospitals, health clinic and hospital, gift shop, games, and the local arcade. What can one learn in the Chuck E Cheese world of chance and prizes?

How about peer teaching, collaboration, problem solving, divergent thinking, and use of multiple strategies? Best of all, how about children feeling they can do anything?
Peer teaching and collaboration

In this project, children had to share knowledge with a peer and combine ideas to achieve a common goal. This sharing provides scaffolds for children to extend their learning to higher levels.

For example, while learning to play a basic board game, Bronte helped explain the rules of Snakes and Ladders to Spencer. Spencer asked, “Where do we start?” Bronte showed him, saying, “We start at one.”

While playing Bingo, Michelle took the lead and drew the letters. She assisted the other children to find if—or where—a letter was on their card.

In playing Memory, Julie directed the sequence of turns among a small group of children.

In other words, children taught each other—they were peer teaching.

They also found opportunities to collaborate. For example, as Adam and Braxton worked together to create their own matching game, they decided that no one should have more than two turns in a row. Their rule was that if you get a match, then you can go again. But if you get a match the second time, your turn is over. Together they agreed on rules that would make their game fair and fun.

Problem solving and divergent thinking

How many ways are there to solve one problem? How do you know which way works best for you? Answers to these questions come with time and space to explore divergent solutions. Consider the following examples:

- We observed Jason had a different idea for the rules for his matching game. He decided that he would hide one card each time the game was played so he would always win. “Fair” for Jason did not include a consideration that those who played with him might not get as much pleasure out of him winning every time as he would. As he walked back to the classroom after the arcade was closed, he tried to understand why he never won a game even though he always had the last card.

- It never occurred to me that in bean-bag toss, the number of points awarded for making the toss did not need to depend on difficulty. Peter attached number labels to his baskets randomly. When more points were earned for easier tosses, his own totals were high and the game was more fun for him.
Aspen created a board game with about 20 spaces. When her first customer reached the end of the board and she was still behind, she explained that he was to keep going and using spaces on the carpeting until she caught up with him. Ten minutes later, their game ended on the other side of the room when her customer finally realized the game would not end until Aspen was proclaimed the winner.

Natalie made a matching game by cutting out small pieces of tissue paper and gluing them to cards. When she turned the cards over, she realized the tissue paper hung over the edges so you could tell which color was underneath. She hid the color by trimming the edges of the tissue paper to make them even with the edges of the cards.

The standard for a 5-year-old is to be able to follow three instructions. But Hunter could think of more than 15 rules for his board game. At the same time, he could remember those rules to direct their use by his peers and customers at the arcade.

While children played *Red Light, Green Light*, I asked Kirsta what we could do differently with the game. She said, "We could make a Fast-Slow game."

When Mary was making Stop and Go signs, Katlin gave her a piece of tape that was too long. Mary said, "That's OK. I'll just put the pipe cleaners higher on the circle."

When children are supported in seeking their own solutions, they brim full of ideas and follow them to resolution.

**Using multiple strategies**

The thinking and planning, or strategies, the children used to win a game became apparent as we watched them play. For example, as Frank played *Go Fish* with Cody and Sally, he was able to garner a large number of matches in each game because he remembered what other people had asked for and then asked them for that card on his next turn.

McKay concentrated hard to remember where he had seen each card in the memory game. He turned over a card he had never seen before and then, if he had seen its match, tried to remember where he had seen it to turn it over for a match. If another child turned over a card he had seen twice, McKay always began by turning over the card he thought matched before turning over the card he had just seen.
Tuning into learning

With experience playing a few simple games with rules, this group of children had confidence they could make any game on their own. Those games ranged from Checkers and Ring Toss to Memory and Monsterland.

Naomi used ink animal stamps to make a matching game complete with a set of rules. One rule: You can turn over four cards at a time, and you can get only one match in a turn.

Tad’s memory game had 16 matching cards.

Stan added the names of his two sisters to his checkerboard.

Payton amazed us all as he counted the squares on his Monsterland board. He started where his piece sat and went to where Weston’s game piece sat. Then he announced he was winning by 32 squares.

Constructing their games with the arcade goal in mind, the children worked on their projects with excitement and confidence. The children were tuned in to learning because they felt ownership, empowered to provide the context for their acquisition and practice of skills. The world is at their feet because they know they can do anything!

About the author

Genan Anderson has worked as an early childhood educator for more than 25 years. She is a mother as well as a former university preschool lab teacher, community college instructor, and elementary school teacher. She is a frequent contributor to Texas Child Care.