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## Let's play

On engaging children's imaginations

**Idit Nathan**

*Visual artist and founder of Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination*

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*'Fantasy is a place where it rains'*

Italo Calvino

*'Such tricks hath strong imagination,  
That, if it would but apprehend some joy,  
It comprehends some bringer of that joy  
Or in the night, imagining some fear,  
How easy is a bush supposed a bear!'*

Shakespeare, A Midsummer Nights Dream

When I start a piece of work, be it written or otherwise, I need a clean slate. I make sure that the mess (creative as it may be) from previous work has been tidied up. Some traces may remain but I need a clear space for starting on another journey into the unknown. Children are often the same. Their imagination thrives when there is least clutter around them and they are allowed to do what they do best – to play. I will aim to tell you a little bit about my work in the last couple of years and hopefully show why I think that space, play, imagination and creativity are all interlinked.

Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination (CCI) is an artist-led initiative that has been operating in its current format around the Cambridge region for the

last couple of years. The artists come from a wide variety of disciplines (Visual Arts, Theatre, Dance and others) and are all 'multidisciplinary' in their own practice (previously theatre designer now visual artist, visual artist now working in theatre, architect now visual artist etc.). CCI's work is process-led, child-centred and site-specific. This means that each project is approached with no defined end result in mind. The work is based as much as possible on observation of the target participants and each project is derived from the specific place where the work takes place or the context within which it evolves. This means that the artists use their imagination as a starting point for unravelling each of the sites they work in.

CCI artists bring their own individual practice to bear upon the work produced collaboratively with other artists, adults and the children in a setting. For example, Sally Brown will bring in an overhead projector (OHP) and Issam Kourbaj will introduce slide mounts for the children to make their own slides. They use various tricks of their trade as contemporary artists. They often 'make the familiar strange' with an aim to challenge participants and engage them, through play, with processes that are open-ended like their own practice. For example, a mirror used daily by the children in the nursery might be covered up with emulsion paint. The process of uncovering it, which the children quickly initiate themselves, creates lively team work, discovery and lots of conversation.

Another common principle that guides the work is the principle of 'less is more', so the means and the resources are as simple as possible: thinking about things and using them in a new context (what happens to a tea strainer when you place it on an OHP? It becomes the start of a beautiful story for a four year old girl and her brother). But the principle of 'less is more' is also applied to the use of space. For example, the children enter a very dark space, blacked out by heavy drapes that also absorb the sounds and create a womb-like feel. Only hand-held mirrors and torches are scattered around and the children embark on amazing 'voyages' of discovery without ever leaving the room. They encounter ogres and princesses and many scarier and not so scary creatures. They tell their own stories and bring their own fears and anxieties. Some of them take days to enter the dark room, some stay for longer and longer at a time, others come back again and again. One boy (with suspected autism) said 'Hello' to his own image for the first time that summer's day. The dark room with so little in it taps into a need many of them have for a space that entices them to invent.

CCI artists see creativity as a 'thinking skill', one that we all have. They, as artists/facilitators, simply provoke participants to explore this skill for themselves firsthand. To think creatively, one does not need to be able to sculpt or draw. CCI artists encourage participants to look afresh and invent with media like paint and the canvas, rather than use it in the traditional, familiar way. So for example, Issam Kourbaj will bring an unprimed canvas from his studio and lay it on the floor of the nursery. He will then sprinkle water drops onto the canvas and these will glisten in the sunshine. Within seconds the children gather and start blowing the water blobs across the surface: a new game has been invented. When the blobs have reached the end of the race and/or have sunk into the fabric, the

children proceed to find another use for the now damp canvas.

### **A Space for Play**

Underlying CCI's ethos is a strong belief in the power of play – as a tool for expression, communication and learning. Play is something we all do, and possibly as adults we do not do often enough. The way CCI artists see and invite play is crucial to their ability to provoke people's imagination. As Dutch historian Huizinga says:

*'Summing up the formal characteristics of play we may call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner.'*<sup>1</sup>

The work we do is open-ended but that does not mean it gets out of control. On the contrary, participants are invited to play in a supportive and relaxed environment, where materials become part of a palette. Anna Townley uses a large window to work with many rolls of cellophane paper. The children enjoy the rolls of paper so much that some adult observers wonder what will happen when they are finished. When the last of the cellophane has been used up, the window is covered with a beautiful colourful mosaic and the sun shines through it. But then one of the children suggests using the cardboard rolls too!

At the same nursery school it was immediately noticeable that one particular mirror placed on the floor in a bare room, with a minimal number of playthings next to it (a couple of wooden animals and a scarf), was very evocative for the children. Here were children with English as second language getting very absorbed for long periods of time, making up elaborate and proficient stories about journeys of dragons across ponds and rivers. A world was conjured up in an empty space with minimal props. The child becomes a storyteller, just like the artists themselves who cross over from one discipline to another, playfully using the tools at their disposal.

### **A Space for Learning**

During the summer of 2002 a pilot project called LIGHTS MIRRORS SHADOWS saw CCI artists and a scientist (after all, scientists are very imaginative in their own practice too) creating environments for three- to four-year-old children, which invited them to explore various aspects of reflections, shadows and lights as the title suggests. More recently for I LIGHT YOU AND YOU LIGHT ME, CCI artists played with Communication and Autism Spectrum pupils and their carers in the swimming pool of their special needs school.

It is often assumed that schools are places where children learn, adults teach and artists come in to do some painting or other activity on 'fun day' or in 'creativity week', often in the summer term. CCI aims to challenge some of these conceptions. Both adults and children learn from the materials brought in to play with, and while artists learn from the educational staff and vice

versa, the adults often learn more from the children themselves. The children's powerful ability to imagine makes possible things that had not been planned. The work produced together is truly process-led; there is no telling where it will lead and yet it is produced in the safe and familiar environment supported by the staff and the artists. A basic web search on imagination brings up a very appropriate line from an Emily Dickinson poem: 'The possible's slow fuse is lit by the imagination.'<sup>2</sup> A ten year old child on the autistic spectrum, learned, and taught some of the adults present at the time, how a fountain works by playing with a transparent tube using his palms to 'push' water up just over the surface of the pool.

### **Space for Discovery (When the Pictures in the Gallery Get a Life of Their Own)**

In the last eighteen months, CCI artists have worked with art galleries in the Cambridge area, notably Kettle's Yard with family groups, and at Wysing Arts with an Early Years parents' and children group. In these galleries, the work aims to tie in with the current exhibits wherever possible. The responses of children to quite complex and not necessarily child-friendly work on display often prove to be a discovery for the adults, be they parents or artists. The children are sent out to look for their favourite work and either to tell a story about what they chose (which the adult carer will often write down for them) or to make up a name for it which will then evolve into a piece of their own in the education room. As the children discover the gallery, the adults discover new angles for observing the work on display and interacting with it. Often a beam of light from the OHP is used as the canvas. On one occasion a child created what he called a 'jelly fish', another child thought it was an 'octopus' and the third made up a story with both octopus and jelly fish caught up in the seaweed. In the gallery were works by abstract artist Ian McKeever. Prior to this, none of the adults had seen sea creatures in his work. It was the children's play with the lights and carefully chosen, minimal materials that enabled this discovery to be made.

### **A Space where the rain can come in**

CCI artists need more time to collaborate with people in the various educational and arts settings, as well as with the families themselves. The work produced would no doubt benefit from longer-term collaborations. The artists need spaces that are flexible and that can be transformed in very simple ways into playful spaces. They also need to have the possibility to fail. That is a crucial part of their practice as artists, as they each embark on something new, not knowing where it will end. Children and their carers also need that space to learn, and possibly to fail, as that is the risk that 'process' inevitably entails. Some of the things CCI artists have introduced, in the projects described above, have not worked as expected. Have they failed then? Or have they simply become one part of the experiment – something that adults – staff, carers and artists alike – can learn from? For the LIGHTS SHADOWS MIRRORS project, a 'shadow tree' out of wire and tubes was constructed, with the idea that the children would hang things on it, and possibly draw the outlines of shadows on the ground below. The children hardly noticed the tree, which was left untouched. Instead they tried to

'stick' one of the artist's shadows down to the paper used nearby. This seems to illustrate again the principle of 'the simpler the means the more fruitful the interaction.' Another principle is that the more open-ended the project (the more room for spontaneity) – the more creative the thinking is that takes place.

CCI artists have tended to work mainly with Early Years settings, though their involvement with special needs as well as their work in galleries, has led them to work with a variety of ages and groups. In some cases, 18 month-old children have been working alongside thirteen-year-olds. The approach of the artists is similar for all age groups, but it is interesting that open-ended, process-led work is less familiar and sometimes more scary to the older children. This may be due to the rigidities built into their schooling. Some older children, however, revel in open-endedness: one eight-year-old participant wrote in her evaluation that, 'the best thing was being able to do what I wanted.' Others may take longer to find their feet. CCI artists encourage them to enjoy and experiment, and often it is when the word 'play' is used that many of them just 'have a go'. Children of all ages find it impossible to resist play.

If we are aiming to encourage children's capacities for imagination, we need to ensure that we create the right kind of spaces, both mentally and physically. In these spaces imagination, curiosity and creativity can all link up and play together and we can allow ourselves to be surprised and to get messy in the process. After all, if we don't let the rain in, then all will dry up and die.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Huizinga, J. (1976), 'Nature and Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon' in Schechner, R. and Schuman, M. (eds) *Ritual Play and Performance*. New York: The Seabury Press, p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> *The Gleam of an Heroic Act*

The gleam of an heroic act

Such strange illumination

The possible's slow fuse is lit

By the imagination.

(Emily Dickenson)

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**Idit Nathan** comes from a Theatre Design background and has, over recent years, developed her own visual arts practice. She founded the Cambridge Centre for Curiosity and Imagination, as an artist-led initiative delivering creative workshops for children and their carers in a variety of settings around the Eastern Region. She recently co-organised the *Hundred*

*Languages of Children* exhibition in Cambridge and has devised and delivered training sessions for early years educators. She has also run a variety of training workshops on creativity and visual practice for secondary and higher education settings as well as businesses. In her own practice, Idit has been artist in residence at Addenbrooke's Hospital. Her work is often interactive and she is currently developing a series of projects exploring the use of digital technology. [Idit.nathan@ntlworld.com](mailto:Idit.nathan@ntlworld.com) (see also [www.addenbrookes.org.uk/serv/nonclin/art/nathan\\_lighted\\_rooms1.html](http://www.addenbrookes.org.uk/serv/nonclin/art/nathan_lighted_rooms1.html))

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