

## VAI EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT

## The Power of Play to Teach Rich Content



Play is a superpower; play produces chemical changes in the brain which improve memory and increase plasticity. Changes that make us smarter and more capable of learning. But in a system that too often pushes educators away from play, how can busy teachers find time to infuse play into their classrooms? Here are some practical, powerful ideas you can use right away!

### Two Types of Play

Sometimes, play takes the form of a structured game or sport. Other times, play can simply be playfulness. Using the following framework to think about different types of play can help us play more creatively and with more variety.

*Playing Uphill* refers to any sort of play that activates the competitive spirit. A basketball player is striving to put a ball in a basket. A chess player works to deliver checkmate. A mountain climber working to reach the summit is involved in the quintessence of playing uphill.

Games and sports that are built around one concrete objective are a valuable way to inject play into the class.

*Playing Downhill* involves open-ended play; we can think of it as any activity that activates the sense of playfulness. Here, there is no single objective; the activity involves activating our curiosity and allowing our explorations to follow their natural course.

A toddler investigating a set of blocks is involved in downhill play. They are not following a set of instructions; they are simply exploring the different ways in which the blocks come together to create more complex patterns and shapes.

Both types of play have value, and including multiple examples of each can help create a diversity of opportunities for students to engage in.

## Playing Uphill

Playing uphill helps us capitalize on students' drive to succeed — but it DOESN'T have to involve creating winners and losers. By having your students cooperate to achieve a game's objective together, you can get everyone pulling in the same direction, building a powerful sense of community. Replacing your competitive uphill play with cooperative uphill play can revolutionize the culture in a classroom — here are a few examples of how it works!

- **Cooperative Play:** Sometimes, the team needs to work together to solve some gamified problem; when that's the case, they're engaged in cooperative play. [The Winding Words](#) game is an example, where students work together to create (and recreate) a string of connected vocab pictures. The idea of cooperative play comes in all shapes and sizes, and is appropriate for younger and older students.
- **Team Trivia:** Another game that's often used competitively, but which can use the power of playing uphill to help kids compete against a standard or a previous best. Set up a Jeopardy!-style game, but instead of keeping track of team or individual scores, keep a running class total. Challenge the team to score a certain number of points.
- **Gamified Classroom Management:** Extend the idea of cooperative competition to increase student ownership of your classroom management needs. Identify an area of improvement as well as a metric to use for measurement, then work together to continue to grow in that regard. For instance, you can set a class target for increasing homework return rate, reducing transition times, or any other objective you'd like to improve!

## Playing Downhill

Instill a playful attitude toward life and learning by sparking student curiosity and encouraging learners to follow their questions to see where they lead. We can foster a playful attitude with some specific teaching strategies that encourage students to play downhill.

- **Messing About:** To understand a concept deeply, students need to be able to connect abstract concepts to the physical world. Help them develop their hands-on understanding by allowing them to experiment and explore with physical manipulatives before using them for more formal learning. Have students structure their thinking by making observations, verbally or in writing, as they follow their curiosity to see where it leads!
- **Tech-Splorations:** Technology can allow students to explore in self-guided ways. Build a [Thinglink](#) to foster student exploration (check out Blue Apple's [Wonderful World](#) or [Field Trip Around the World](#) activities for examples). Another great approach is to create your own tech-splorations using [Hyperdocs](#), which allow you to customize the scope of sites your students can use to explore.
- **Simulations:** Let your students play with ideas by using the power of simulations. [Phet](#), from the University of Colorado, has a huge variety of scientific simulations. Students can explore history with [History Simulations](#). Or, you can set up a more analog simulation like [The Baboons' Dilemma](#)!

## GAMES, GAMES, GAMES!

Check out three ingenious little games from the makers of Blue Apple projects. Students will hone their vocabularies, improve their visual-spatial skills, and learn a plethora of fun facts — and they'll have a great time doing it!

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# PLAY AND PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

## State of Sustainability



Play is built into every Blue Apple project. In State of Sustainability, for instance, students start with an ingenious fishing game that allows students to understand the concept of sustainability in a deep and concrete way. [Check it out!](#)

- This [Project Overview](#) provides a lesson-by-lesson summary of this project.
- Here is a [Recommended Book List](#) of rich, diverse literature on the topic of respectful discourse.
- Check out [K-8 Content Standard Connections](#) for this project.
- To see this project in action, check out the [project video](#).

## Conclusion

Students of any age benefit from playing in diverse ways. Use the idea of playing uphill and playing downhill to create rich, playful opportunities for your students and to create a classroom culture full of curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking!

**[Click here](#) if you would like to see a 30-minute webinar presentation of this content:**  
**The Power of Play to Teach Rich Content**

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