

# **PLAY! (Participatory Learning and You!) Pilot:**

## **Professional Development with Los Angeles Unified School District Educators (LAUSD), Grades 6-12**

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### **PLAY! (Participatory Learning And You!)**

Over the past year, our team at the [Annenberg Innovation Lab](#) at the [University of Southern California](#) has pursued a multi-faceted research project that we refer to as [PLAY!](#). The word PLAY! is not only an acronym for [Participatory Learning and You!](#) but also represents our appreciation of the value of the [new media literacy \*play\*](#) in the educational process. As educators are pressured to ruthlessly focus on teaching to the test, play is too often left by the wayside.

Our goal is to foster a more participatory culture in which every young person has the skills, access, knowledge, and support they need in order to meaningfully participate in the new media landscape. Such a culture supports learning not only in school, but across the ecosystem; it provides the scaffolding that youths and adults need to build creative, rewarding projects not only now, but for the rest of their lives. Play is an important vehicle for bringing about this cultural shift.

Insert Participatory Culture Puppet Video - <http://vimeo.com/33121279>

*Caption:* What is participatory culture?

*Play* challenges teachers to create a classroom culture where both they and their students feel safe to experiment creatively and fail productively. In formal education settings, many teachers have mixed feelings about embracing this risk. For students, *play* might invoke fears of personal failure; for teachers, *play* means letting go of prescribed outcomes. *Play* is often perceived as “being off-task,” an activity whose end is “frivolous fun.” We have learned, however, that with permission to experiment and discover through playful learning – fears, resistances, and misunderstandings quickly dissolve. Consequently, students’ levels of engagement, self-confidence, skill proficiency, and knowledge retention increase, and teachers’ needs for participation in a robust learning community are met (Project New Media Literacies, 2009, 2010).

### **Participatory Design for Professional Development**

Informal learning contexts often facilitate youths’ acquisition of valuable skills and experiences, yet access to these sites varies widely. Whereas the digital divide focuses on the unequal access to technologies, the “participation gap” is concerned with “the unequal access to the opportunities, experiences, skills, and knowledge that will prepare youth for full participation in the world of tomorrow” (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton,

Weigel & Robison, 2006, p. 3). Schools and libraries may be best situated to provide students with more egalitarian access to these opportunities. So how do we achieve that? This question inspired PLAY! to ask, "How can we integrate the tools, insights, and skills of a participatory culture into the public education system in the United States?" PLAY!'s answer was to work directly with teachers, modeling what participatory pedagogy can look like when integrated across grades and subject areas. Thus, PLAY! developed a two-part professional development pilot for Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) educators of grades 6-12: The Summer Sandbox and PLAYing Outside the Box, which ran consecutively from July to December 2011.

### *The Summer Sandbox*

The Summer Sandbox was designed as an intensive one-week professional development (PD) workshop geared toward collaborative exploration of participatory learning. PLAY! hoped that, by experiencing the rewards of a participatory learning environment first-hand, participants would go on to explore PLAY!'s pedagogy more deeply in their own classrooms and schools. Twenty-one educators from 17 schools and a multitude of disciplines, including social studies, physical education, life sciences and special education, completed the program.

In terms of technology, The Summer Sandbox modeled various digital media tools and resources such as wikis, blogs, video-sharing sites, online presentation and design software, mobile devices, mobile apps, and the PLAYground, PLAY!'s online platform. The PD also modeled the productive use of non-digital media and technology, such as analog art and writing tools (see Figures 1 and 2), board games, face-to-face conversation, and personal artifacts. This approach emphasized the philosophy that technologies should be judged in context, according to their capacity to help learners meet learning goals. No single technology, whether high tech (e.g., Wikipedia), low tech (e.g., CD-roms), or no tech (e.g., role-play), is an unqualified boon. Additionally, PLAY! facilitators refused to assume the position of expert by unilaterally teaching participants any given technology. They challenged participants instead to reflect on their discrete lesson's learning goals, identify tools that might help meet those goals, search for and locate those tools, learn how to use them through play, and incorporate or reject according to the tools' potential. When time permitted, facilitators also sat down beside participants and joined them as co-learners in the process of pursuit and discovery.

Accordingly, The Summer Sandbox's curriculum included (but was not limited to): hands-on activities; individual and small group challenges; community partners' resource presentations; critical dialogues; artifact manipulations; expert sharing sessions; and curriculum construction. Participants also engaged in exploration, practice, and remix on the PLAYground, which is a free online platform for the curation, creation and circulation of user-generated learning activities.



Figure 1. Participants were invited to inform their co-learners about their strengths and challenges so that the riches of the community could be identified and maximized.

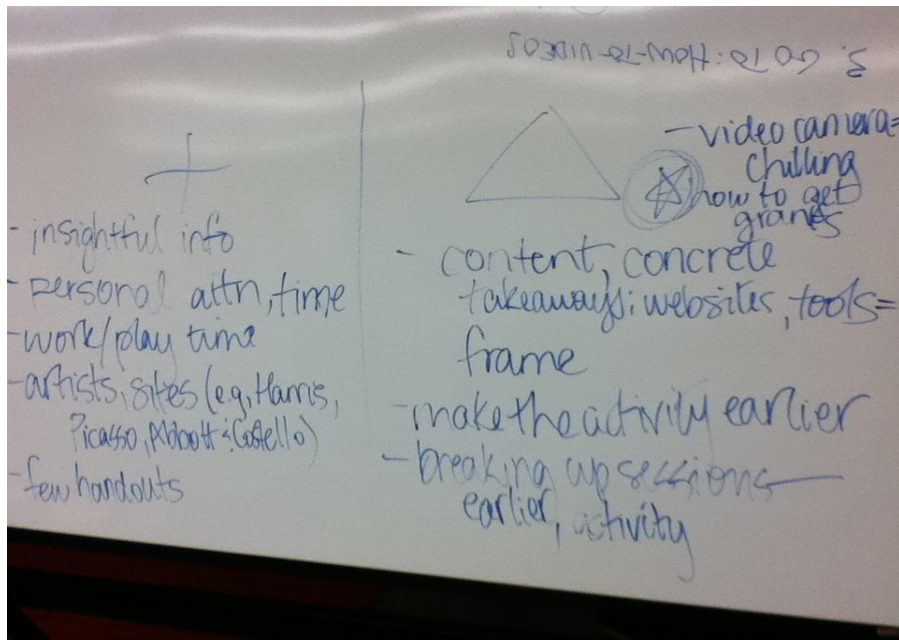


Figure 2. On a daily basis, participants were also welcomed to declare which parts of the session were working for them and which parts could benefit from retooling.

Collectively, these experiences were designed to provide participants with opportunities to:

- showcase identity;
- build capacity and community;
- gain familiarity with new media literacy skills, social and emotional learning skills, and participatory learning;
- meaningfully integrate new technology practices that heighten engagement in learning;
- evaluate how well their classrooms support participatory learning;
- rethink curriculum design to incorporate participatory learning practices;
- reflect on pedagogy and offer feedback to others in face-to-face and mediated contexts; and
- have fun!

For management of curricula and communication, The Summer Sandbox relied upon its PLAY! [wiki](#). This space for asynchronous reflection and democratic sharing was intended to increase ownership of and participation in the PD experience.

Some teachers' goals for participation The Summer Sandbox included boosting student engagement, incorporating more technology into their teaching, and connecting with like-minded peers.

*"I hope to learn innovating [sic] strategies that will enhance my lessons, which will challenge my students to become 21st Century learners. In addition, I hope to develop relationships with fellow colleagues and form a partnership with neighboring schools and organizations." –Participating teacher*

Several teachers also hoped to increase both the relevance of curricular materials and their own self-efficacy vis-a-vis technology.

*"I am looking to expand my own knowledge and understanding of using technology as a critical learning and instructional medium. I would like to learn new ways to design relevant lessons and projects for my students." – Participating teacher*

On their applications for The Summer Sandbox, very few educators mentioned the effectiveness of harnessing media from popular culture to help students access core concepts. Far more identified the utility of high-tech media, such as digital presentation tools, for this purpose:

*"I enjoy using media in my daily classroom instruction. Images, video clips and music helps students to open their imaginations. The students learn best when their imaginations allow them to connect music, lyrics, for example, to the history content I communicate to them" – Participating Teacher*

However, immediately after the week-long PD, these teachers perceived drastically different ways to meet their educational goals, shifting from techno-centrism to participatory design and play:

*"After this week, I realize that while there is some equipment I will likely purchase to help me implement my fledgling plans – the discussion as to the social,*

*cultural, and political implications of using images, accessing information, and presenting information sort of made it quite urgent that my teaching from now on is informed by these discussions. For example, many of my students already own iPod Touch units, so after this week, it seems imperative that I give them an opportunity to actually use them for learning. ... My future goals are to prime the pump with things like the 54-second video, and creating a Challenge for my kids to use in class, and start a Wiki about what they are currently learning, but to hand over the control of the content to them.” – Participating Teacher*

Karl, a physical education teacher who initially just wanted to find activities for his students to do on rainy days, concluded by realizing his passion for learning through games. Middle-school educators Katie and Natalie entered with the aspiration to better grasp media literacy concepts and left with the resolve to incorporate new media literacies (NMLs) into their curricula. Most participants also designed no, low and high tech activities to critically examine media products’ potentials and/or creatively incorporate social networking. For example, U.S. history teacher Nancy planned for her students to adopt the identities of various Founding Fathers and compose digital or analog Tweets espousing their perspectives.

INSERT edited teachers’ testimony from Summer Sandbox: <http://vimeo.com/30071237>  
*Caption:* Teachers reflect on their experiences during the last day of the intensive week-long Summer Sandbox.

### *PLAYing Outside the Box*

In order to sustain The Summer Sandbox graduates’ implementation of participatory learning, PLAY! offered a PD extension called PLAYing Outside the Box (POTB). Its structure was even less prescriptive than that of the relatively malleable five-day immersion. POTB was conceptualized more as a service than a seminar, intended to scaffold and support participants’ self-directed efforts. This personalizable design reflects innovation in PD best practice. According to education expert Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond (2006), “[P]rograms must help teachers develop the disposition to continue to seek answers to difficult problems of teaching and learning and the skills to learn *from* practice (and from their colleagues) as well as to learn *for* practice” (p. 304).

In addition to a second LAUSD salary point and \$1000 stipend, participants also benefited from tailored, one-on-one mentoring; continued access to like-minded communities of practice; and outlets for demonstration of and reflection on experiments in curriculum and pedagogy. Approximately half of The Summer Sandbox graduates enrolled in POTB. These 10 educators hailed from 10 different schools, located up to 20 miles apart, that served student populations whose socioeconomic and developmental profiles varied considerably.

POTB utilized a research approach that values co-constructed knowledge-building through collaboration, known as Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR is an iterative cycle of planning, action and reflection, with regular re-evaluation over time (Aringay, 2008).

PLAYing Outside the Box’s curriculum consisted of the following elements:

**Reading:** Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century (Jenkins et al., 2006) was the only “required” reading. Prior to the PD, none of the participants had read this conceptual springboard for PLAY!.

**Discussion:** In order to share and expand on PLAY!’s concepts and practices in context, participants were encouraged to utilize the PLAY! wiki, the PLAYground platform, VoiceThread and Vimeo.

**PLAY On! Workshops:** Participants could choose to participate in at least one of three PLAY On! programs held after-school and/or on Saturdays. These diverse programs offered no, low, and high tech means to experiment with *civic engagement through storytelling* (see Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3. *Teachers mark and annotate their schools’ neighborhoods in Los Angeles during a Departures Youth Voices session.*

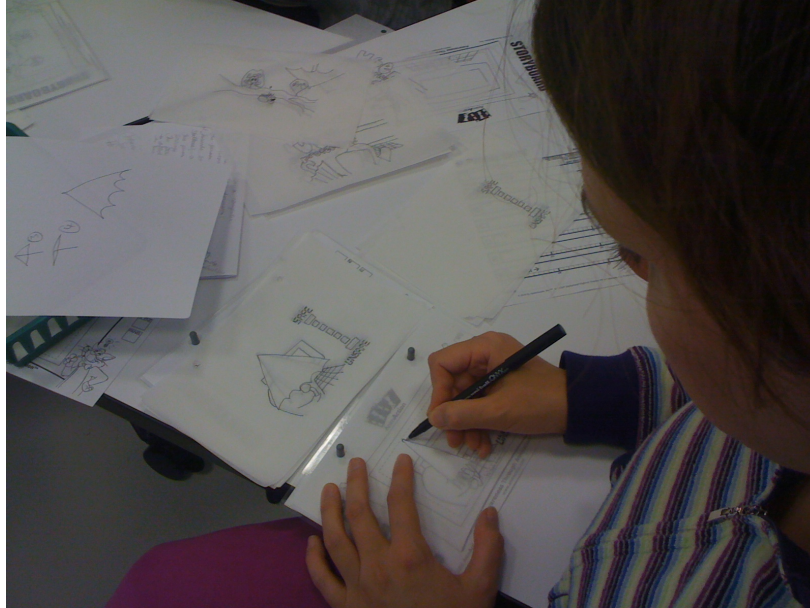
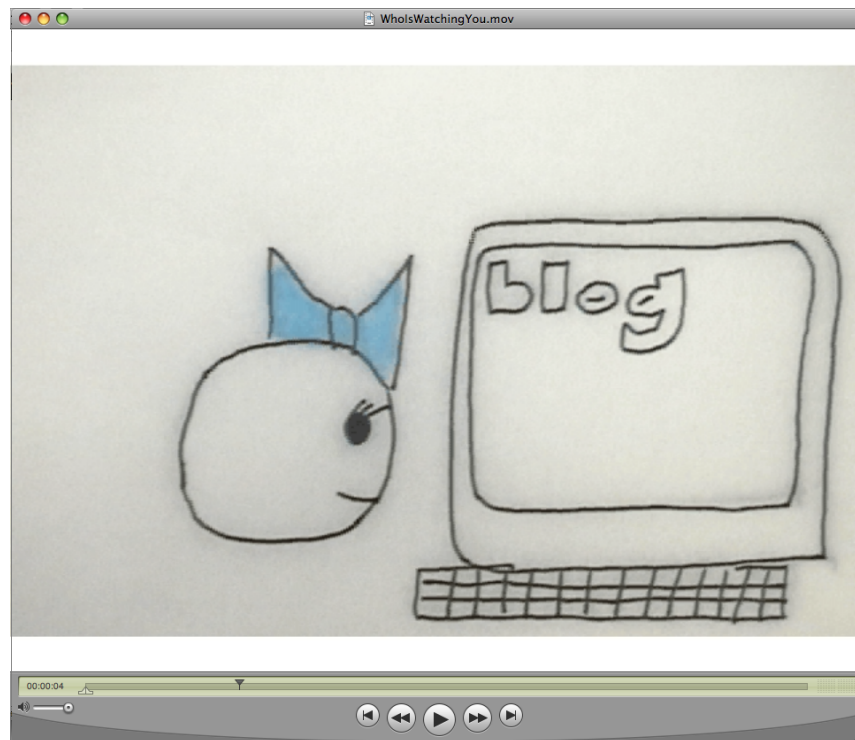


Figure 4. *An English teacher draws animation frames with AnimAction during a Saturday workshop.*



*Video still from teachers' AnimAction project about online participation*

**Coaching:** POTB offered ongoing, one-on-one mentorship to all participants. This support was intended to help educators realize the goals they had set during The Summer Sandbox, as well as facilitate their efforts' long-term sustainability. Participants reported increased self-confidence and self-efficacy, and appreciated their mentor's

instrumental and emotional support as they experimented with new tools and pedagogical approaches.



Figure 5. Examples of no tech and low tech ways of using Twitter. U.S. Government teacher Nancy believed in “meeting students where they’re at with what they’re already doing,” and so designed this opportunity to creatively assess her students’ knowledge about historical figures.

**Video Reflection:** Watching oneself on video and receiving supportive, critical feedback from peers and coaches supports teachers’ active knowledge construction and sense of self-efficacy (Goker, 2005; Pickering, 2003). Classrooms are complex contextual environments; to make sense of these spaces, repeated viewings of video logs and reflections are crucial (Kinzer & Risko, 1998). Thus, participants in POTB videotaped themselves leading an activity in their classroom and uploaded these videos to a private space on Vimeo. They also videotaped and uploaded a post-activity reflection. POTB peers and PLAY! facilitators viewed these videos and offered feedback via comments.

Video: <http://vimeo.com/33052302>

(or Screenshot: Isabel1.png)

*Jasmine’s lesson: Congressional Soccer, American Government and Economics, Grade 12*

Video: <http://vimeo.com/3305283>

*Jasmine reflects on her own lesson.*

**Transmedia Play:** The PLAYground is an open-content, open-knowledge online system that encourages both adults and youth to discover, learn and teach each other. The PLAYground uses “Challenges,” or non-linear, transmedia lessons and activities, to encourage learning through play (see Figure 6). Teachers in POTB informed the PLAYground’s current design by using the platform during its alpha phase and sharing usability feedback in focus groups.



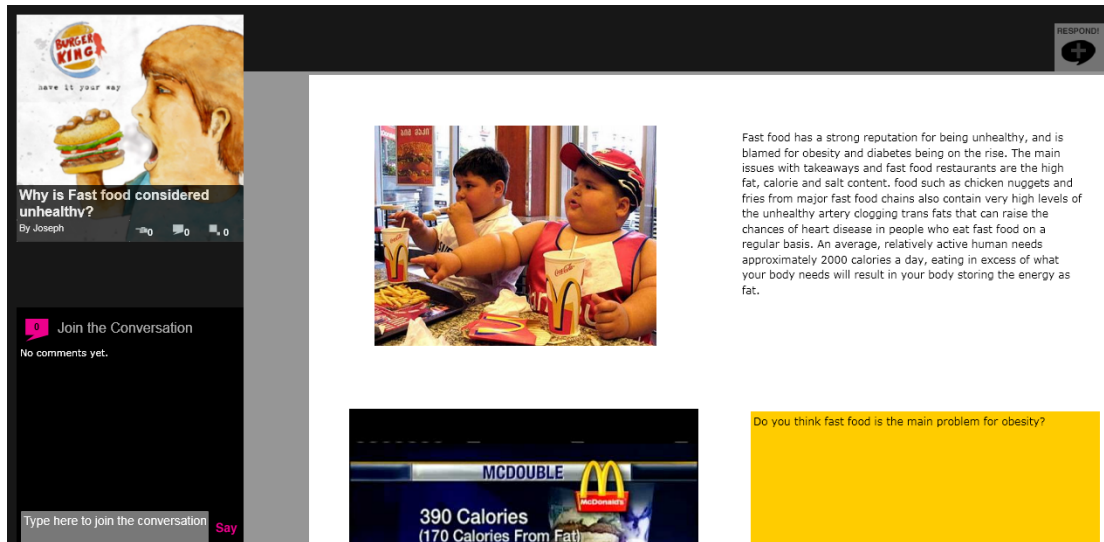


Figure 6. Student-created Challenge for Helen's English class

Video: <http://vimeo.com/32107741>

*Helen reflects on using the PLAYground with students in English class*

**PLAY! Retreat:** POTB participants met for one last session to share classroom experiences, reflect on personal growth, identify challenges, discuss sustainability, and plan for next steps.

#### *Participant Reflections*

Facilitators utilized a reflection technique called Most Significant Change (MSC; Davies & Dart, 2005). MSC asks participants to describe their personal experiences of program-produced change and articulate “the significance of the story from their point of view” (Davies & Dart, 2005, p. 26). (*Link to this activity's protocol [here](#).*)

While each participant's experience was unique, three key themes emerged across all the stories: surrendering some classroom control in order to honor students' self-directed learning and creativity; embracing technology and digital media even in the absence of personal expertise/mastery; and valuing process over product – that is, escaping the tyranny of perfection.

Literacy coach Natalie titled her MSC account “Becoming Tech Savvy.” Natalie introduced a unit called “Voices for Change” in which students researched, wrote, filmed, and edited public service announcements on issues of their choosing.

*“Being able to acquire the skills to use different digital tools... being able to navigate various issues that came up... It empowered me, made me feel more confident as an educator in the 21st century because, while I assume that my students know a lot, on the other hand, they don't, and yet they are very familiar with a lot of what social media is and how it's what engages them, and so now I feel more equipped to make my instruction relevant to them.”*

*“It [the PD] inspired me to think about what kind of things do I want to change...I would encourage as many teachers to just keep an open mind, to be willing to*

*make mistakes, to be willing to have fun, know that not everything's going to work out perfectly, but that's okay, it's going to help you to become more proficient.”*

High school government and economics teacher Jasmine dubbed her story “Giving Voice to the Youth.”

*“For me the most significant change was ... I've definitely integrated it [technology] into pretty much every project. In the past I was worried that I didn't have all the skills necessary to teach them things or we [school] didn't have all the equipment or they [students] didn't have it at home. But I thought, this year, let's just go for it. And I was open to students participating in whatever way they could.”*

Subsequently, she modified her curriculum extensively, introducing a project in which students visited the Occupy L.A. encampment and created a PLAYground Challenge to share out their learning (see Figure 7).

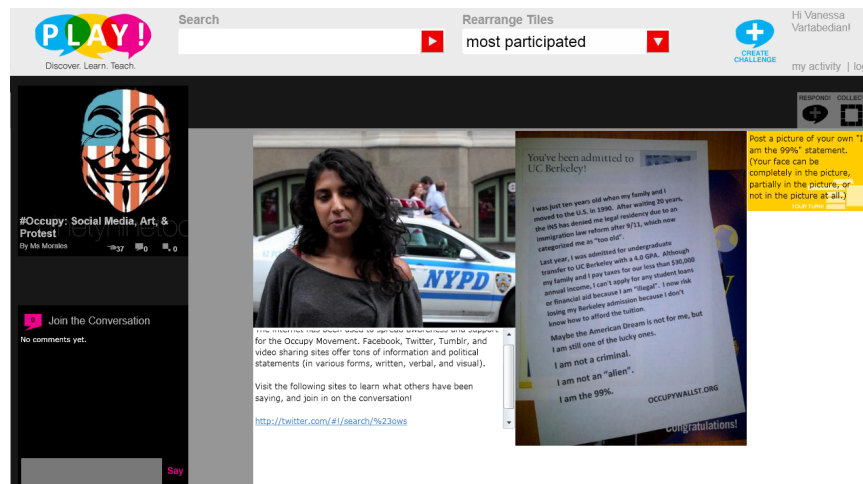


Figure 7. “#Occupy: Social Media, Art and Protest” Challenge created by Jasmine, a high school government and economics teacher

Continued Jasmine:

*“Our kids have made songs. They've made videos. They've done stuff online (see Figure 8). And I actually think they've learned a lot. This is the first year that, after a unit is over, students come back to it and they're like, ‘Oh, Miss, did you hear that this happened with Occupy L.A. or on a Facebook page?’ They'll just post videos and news stories about it and talk about it. And I'm like, ‘Well, that's cool.’”*

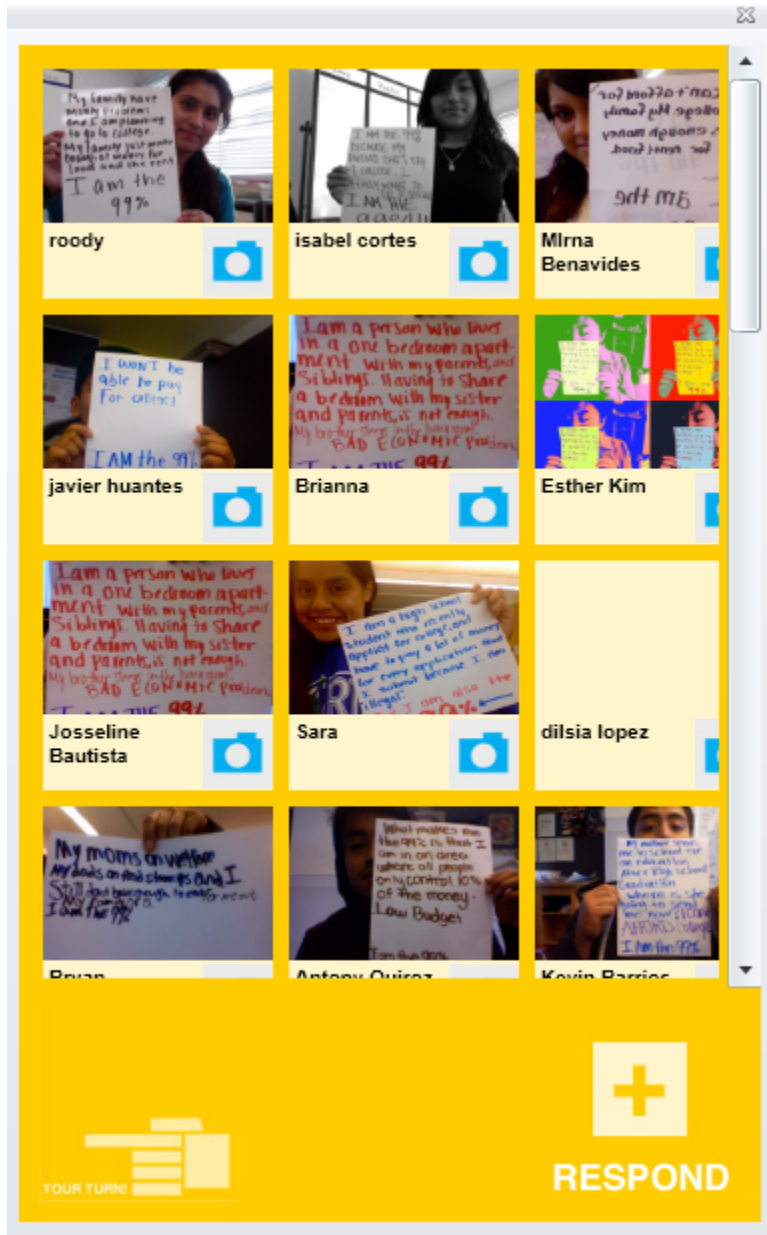


Figure 8. Jasmine's government and economics students' "I am the 99%" statements, posted as "Your Turn" responses to the "#Occupy: Social Media, Art and Protest" Challenge

A classroom viewing of the Chinese documentary *Please Vote for Me* also ignited Jasmine's students' curiosity.

*"I think that this year my students have definitely gotten more engaged with the world. They said, 'Can we have our own election?' I was like, 'Well, I wasn't planning on it, but okay, let's do it...' And in there I integrated things about campaigning and media, and so we became a class congress, and so they're learning how bills get passed but by doing it themselves...It has involved letting go, and just being very, very experimental. And being okay with it if it's not*

*perfect. But I think we're having a really good experience."*

## **Sustainability**

Despite these dedicated educators' passion, several issues still challenge comprehensive and long-term sustainability of PLAY!-related practices and networks. When queried as to the type of support that educators require in order to variously incorporate digital media, learning through play, participatory learning, and new media literacies into their classrooms, educators' responses cohered around three categories: curricular support, e.g., online support community, lesson plans, models, and examples; personal support, e.g., administrator buy-in, professional development/training, peers' endorsement, and classroom assistance; and financial support, e.g., funds for materials.

Broadly, teachers need time. They need paid time outside of the classroom to develop curricula and assessments, seek inspiration and reflect on experiences, and engage in mentor relationships (both as teachers and as students). Teachers and students also need more free time inside of the classroom to build community and culture, explore new processes and pursue emergent opportunities, and ensure that formal schooling doesn't prevent true education. When these aforementioned activities are conducted socially as opposed to individually, embedded within and supported by a community of practice, then their richness increases (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Additional sustainability challenges include:

- firewalls and Internet filters commonly installed on school networks that deny users' access to social networking, gaming, and other sites in which rich collective experiences can be enjoyed. According to Jenkins, this effectively "strips the [Internet's] collective intelligence of [its] diversity," thereby reducing its potential and diminishing its value (cited in Long, 2008);
- inadequate digital technology at school (related to difficulty in booking lab space and equipment, or simply not having such resources at all);
- equity/access differentials related to digital technology use out of school due to families' various income levels and purchasing decisions;
- lack of administrator buy-in (to the point of forbidding the use of mobile devices); and
- lack of co-teachers' support (who often become annoyed with students using mobile devices in their classes and so threaten confiscation).

Although PLAY! facilitators frequently modeled the wiki and participants posted to the wiki during the PD's tenure, neither the space nor the practice has been taken up. Because POTB educators are so spread out across the sprawling district, they are unlikely to bump into one another regularly or even randomly. Thus absent from both virtual and physical common grounds, POTB graduates risk losing touch.

Such a fate would be an anathema to Ziyi, who declared at the program's concluding retreat, "I really need us to somehow continue. Because not many people in the district are doing this kind of stuff and it's difficult to get a group together that's doing just creative things like everybody else is doing... I just need the opportunity and a place and time for us to have future gatherings like this. Because I've gotten a lot out of it and just to see what other people are doing is really inspirational and it gives me ideas about

what I could do on my own classroom. So I need more. Please don't let it stop.”

**Vanessa Vartabedian**

*PLAY! (Participatory Learning and You) Coordinator*

Vanessa plays an integral part of developing, implementing and assessing new models of participatory learning through PLAY! action-research methods at USC's Annenberg Innovation Lab. PLAY! projects include after-school programs for students and professional development with teachers in Los Angeles. Vanessa's background is in theatre, film and education. She is the producer and director of several award-winning short films, Founder of Tidal Theatre Company in New York/Cape Cod and holds a BFA in Theatre from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts.

**Laurel Felt**

*PLAY! (Participatory Learning and You) Research Assistant*

Laurel, a doctoral candidate at USC's Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, focuses on nurturing youths' social and emotional competence and meaningful communication. With PLAY!, Laurel developed pedagogy, wrote curricula, taught programs, designed research, and analyzed data. Currently, Laurel co-chairs USC Impact Games; consults with Laughter for a Change, GameDesk; and develops curriculum for USC Joint Education Project, USC Shoah Foundation Institute. Laurel received her B.S. from Northwestern University and M.A. from Tufts University.

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