Teachers, educators, mentors, instructors or anyone who plays a role in influencing youth, garner more enthusiasm, engagement and a willingness to learn and excel when the learning experience includes play. This is seen through lived experience in youth organizations such as the Chalet Kent Youth Centre (CK). Part of the city’s urban, cultural fabric, located in Côte-des-Neiges, a Montréal borough known for its rich multiculturalism and its up-and-coming tastemakers, CK is a nonprofit organization committed to creating safer spaces and opportunities for support and mentorship for youth aged 11–18. It is dedicated to inspiring and empowering youth through activities that enable them to build meaningful relationships, engage in critical thinking, develop key skills and (re)imagine more just, sustainable futures.

Our programming includes theme-based relevant group discussions, 3D printing, homework help, mediation, free play, a music studio, dance, video games and a multimedia space. Through these activities, we have observed how play, in its many forms, contributes to active learning among youth, and has effectively yielded creative, experimental, innovative and unique experiences that offer enjoyable ways of learning and encourage knowledge retention. In addition, we have seen how the activities result in youth acquiring diverse skills that benefit the overall person. Furthermore, these forms of play have been shown to be culturally agnostic—everyone participates, engages, learns. They connect culturally diverse youth, who learn from different backgrounds and traditions.

The CK music studio is a great example of learning through play. Music, and the lyrics associated with songs, often act as instructors to youth. Lyrics can serve as gospel. They speak to them. They teach them. They influence their views of the world around them. When youth are encouraged to write their own music and lyrics, they speak their truths and their reality. They learn a new form of self-expression and a cool way of sharing it, and subsequently develop their creativity, self-confidence and a better capacity to express themselves. The latter gets refined as they become keen to learn more about the world around them to incorporate current affairs affecting their world more aptly into their art.

Another example is Philo-Box. Youth explore and examine life through philosophical discussions, while applying respect, communication, managing emotions and exceeding personal expectations to boxing classes. Gaming is another play-based offering which develops problem-solving, strategizing and cooperation skills, and teaches technology. Youth are also exposed to various facets that are peripheral to video games, such as music, storytelling and game design. Furthermore, youth learn of the broad range of potential career paths in the gaming industry (e.g. history graduates are hired to provide historical contexts in games), and this goes further to alleviate parents’ fears, who see the actual learning associated with gaming.

Through these and other play-based activities, youth not only develop technical skills, but also lean into soft skills like teamwork, collaboration and communication. Beyond the bonds formed, the cultural divide disappears, and youth recognize that we are all one people, enduring the same struggles, aspiring towards similar dreams. They value camaraderie and respect diverse points of view. They develop a sense of belonging in an increasingly divided world, where the example they are shown daily is one where adults who disagree do not know how to communicate. In this world that is more and more polarized, CK gives youth the tools to face current challenges.
We observed that youth develop a strong sense of generosity and desire to help one another, even under difficulty. For example, one teen earned a bit of money and bought everyone french fries. This is an outcome of the bonds they were taught to build through playful interactions and strong sense of belonging and companionship that the CK staff instills in the youth.

From the accounts of youth, play is not incorporated into pedagogy at their institutions. Yet, our observations, while not scientific nor grounded in empirical evidence, are, to us, undeniable proof that learning through play is an effective way for youth to learn and to develop key skills that are critical to navigating this complex world and are instrumental in helping them to follow the path of their choice with confidence, empathy and an open mind. As we age, rules and formality replace play, and the joys of learning through active, enjoyable experiences are replaced by rote, structured teaching. Outcomes and success are valued, while exploration and learning through enriching experiences are less so. Yet the evidence is clear to us. Learning by doing produces optimal outcomes – when “doing” is playful, engaging, thoughtful and fun, the learner gains long-lasting meaning from the experience.

Play-based learning is not just for youth. If we could all keep the spirit of play within us, we would all be truly lifelong learners. In the words of one of our youth, “Play is freedom.” At CK, we say, press “Play” for more options!

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