PROMOTING PLAYFUL LEARNING AMIDST UNCERTAINTY: RESPONDING TO A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

2020-2021 ANNUAL REPORT

2115 Summit Avenue
St. Paul, MN 55105
apthomas@stthomas.edu
(651) 263-9979
PlayfulLearningLab.org
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## I. INTRODUCTION
- Messages from Dr. Annmarie Thomas & Abby Bensen
- Who Are We?
- Faculty & Students

## II. LAB PROJECTS
- Playline
- The Playbook
- The Playground
- Playfest
- Art Together Now
- Other Projects

## III. MEDIA & ENGAGEMENT
- Let's Talk Social
- In the Media
- Web Engagement
- Publications & Presentations

## IV. FINANCES & SUPPORTERS
- Lab Finances
- Our 2020-2021 Supporters
I. INTRODUCTION
It is one of the greatest honors and joys of my career to lead the Playful Learning Lab. I am inspired by the work this team of amazing young adults has accomplished. This 2020-2021 academic year was by far the one in which the Lab faced its biggest challenges, but it was also the year in which they designed and implemented their most impactful programs yet. Whether supporting teachers around the globe transitioning to online learning, running a joyful (yet socially distanced) summer program for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children, creating music and video with thousands of people from around the globe, or developing the PLAYfest conferences to bring together educators for a shared experience, the students of the Playful Learning Lab brought their creativity, skills, and kindness to everything they did.

I am also overwhelmed with gratitude to the individuals, foundation, companies, and organizations that support the lab financially. We would not exist without you, and you are all part of the Playful Learning Lab family!

With gratitude,
AnnMarie Thomas (apthomas@stthomas.edu)

---

2020-2021 was not the academic year anyone envisioned. We could never have expected a global pandemic and the ways it changed how we live, work, learn, and play.

But through it all, I’ve witnessed the Playful Learning Lab respond to the needs of the community, to not only continue the service it would have provided in a normal year but to have, by far, its most impactful year yet. We saw students’ need to continue learning throughout the summer during lockdown, so we created PLAYground. We saw educators’ need for a community to reflect on the shifts in education, so we began hosting PlayLine. We saw the global need to bring people together, so we created Art Together Now. This year has been one of crisis, yes, but serving to fill a need is what the Playful Learning Lab does best.

When I began working with the Lab in early 2019, I remember there being around 20 employees. Today, just two years later, we have nearly doubled in size, and it seems that the group--and its impact--continues to grow. Our projects continue to reach and benefit new people in new places. Moreover, this year’s events have demonstrated the need for more equitable representation, ranging from race to accessibility, and we continue to value and prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion in all we do.

In addition, I want to be sure to share what a blessing and privilege it has been to me to be a part of the Playful Learning Lab community. As the school year wrapped up in the spring of 2020 (a time of widespread layoffs and furloughs), AnnMarie assured us that whoever wanted a job for the summer would have one. She would dip into our rainy-day fund because it was indeed looking very cloudy. As many Lab members worked through the summer, we had the opportunity to undertake big projects. This work was made possible by the generosity of sponsors, grants, and gifts. Upon reflection, 2020-2021 was a time of networked support, where each node in the network (sponsors, Lab members, partners and collaborators, educators, kids, and more) opened doors and made a difference.

This year has shown us, now more than ever, the importance of joy, play, and community in learning. I’m excited to present to you, in the following pages, who we are and what we do.

Abby Bensen
Established in 2009 at the University of St. Thomas, the Playful Learning Lab (PLL) is an interdisciplinary research group that creates engaging, hands-on educational experiences with an emphasis on integrating play into learning. We focus on science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM) concepts and collaborate with a wide network of schools, teachers, professional organizations, community organizations, and our Lab alumni.

While one-third of Lab members are engineers, the PLL is vastly interdisciplinary—it is made up of 39 undergraduate students from 23 majors across 16 departments and 4 schools within the university. The undergraduate students in the Lab are transformed into education-minded leaders. Because of their autonomy, student Lab members gain hands-on experience designing and creating resources used globally, working with community and professional partners, and actively responding to needs in the community. They regularly publish and present scholarly papers on Lab projects, and Lab alumni have gone on to success in many fields including graduate studies and entrepreneurship.

The PLL’s work revolves around our 3 Lab rules: be kind, clean up your messes, and play well with others. We live out these rules through our relationships with Lab alumni and community members, through our carbon offset program for Lab emissions, and through the mentality of respect and integrity we hold as we pursue these projects.
FACULTY

Dr. AnnMarie Thomas
Dr. Deb Besser
Dr. Jeff Jalkio
Dr. Doug Orzolek

STUDENTS

Rahagd Algogandi
Rahaf Bahajry
Maria Blaklund
Abby Bensen
Taylor Casey
Kelly Cassidy
Cailin Cretton
Rachel Farah

Emma Fredrickson
Colin Goldbach
Kristina Harffmann
Meyla Harjamaki
Claire Howard
Sang Johansen
Lizzy Johnson
Cullen Kittams

Grace Kubista
Becca Leininger
Kirsten Leonardi
Julia Lindell
Carli Lund
Zane Lundsgaard
Mina McMillian
Emma Monson

Vanessa Montes de Oca Correa
Annalisa Petrangelo
Makayla Quinn
Patrick Roche
Eise Rodich
Kristsa Schumacher
Khaled Shouman
Maggie Stout

Tom Sucher
Sara Thibault
Emily Tuchtenhagen
Verdis Webb IV
Christina Yang

not pictured:
Amal Abdi
Mahamed Abdi

MAJORS

Mechanical Engineering
Electrical Engineering
Civil Engineering
Computer Engineering
5-8 General Science
9-12 Life Science Education
K-12 Education
STEM Education
Elementary Education

Psychology
Computer Science
Public Health
Spanish
Physics
Accounting
Catholic Studies

Instrumental Music Education
Music
English
Creative Writing
Strategic Communication
Communication and Journalism
Digital Media Arts
Operations and Supply Chain Management
II. LAB PROJECTS
As a response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the spread of online learning, we began hosting live meetups for educators. We gathered together for 30 minutes each weekday as an opportunity to collaborate and to contemplate our role as educators in an uneasy time.

300 MEETINGS
(MARCH 16TH, 2020 - MAY 31, 2021)

160 ATTENDEES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

“I’m not a morning person, and I live in California. The PlayLine meetings are at 7:00am Pacific Time, and honestly, the PlayLine video chats are what get me up every weekday morning. We have brainstormed problems together, and discussed how different museums and school districts were handling COVID safety precautions. We have cheered each other’s successes and helped each other through challenges. Looking back on the past year, I have made so many new friends and professional connections because of the PlayLine.”

-Rachel, CA

“PlayLine became an important part of my daily routine early in the pandemic shutdown. I had no paid work for almost a year. It would have been easy for me to disengage and sleep late most days. PlayLine connected me to ideas, resources, and people who have contributed to my continued growth as a teacher.”

-Peter, MN

“The Playline was a really invaluable source of community during the pandemic. We also found the group to be a great source of inspiration and a sounding board as we developed our new book, MAKE:Geometry. We’ll be giving the group an acknowledgement in the preface, and they’ll always have our gratitude!”

-Joan, CA

“I enjoyed meeting up with people who were not normally in my social or professional circle and being able to share ideas objectively without the preconceived ideas that my normal colleague circle has about my classroom or my teaching style. I also loved hearing ideas from others—from all over the country—about what they were involved in, the creative process, book recommendations, problem-solving strategies, and just plain camaraderie... Playline helped me view my curriculum from a new perspective and also dabble in what I saw as 'lost creativity' of my own—my forgotten love for arts and crafts, circuitry, simple engineering, and art. I wrote a poem for the first time in years. I met a lot of interesting people and felt heard and purposeful. I remembered how to slow down. I revisited the idea of playing to learn and learning to play. Overall, it was one of the best parts of my year.”

-Jan, IL
The PLAYbook is a series of activity booklets that was started during the summer of 2020 for PLAYground, our virtual summer camp. Since then, it has blossomed into its own project, as a resource for educators, parents, and kids.

PLAYbooks are available online for download in English, Spanish, Arabic, and Somali. Physical copies were distributed (with crayons) to organizations around the Twin Cities (including family shelter, and schools).
Recognizing a need to keep kids playing and learning while at home, we designed PLAYground, an 8-week virtual summer camp for Deaf and Hard of Hearing students. Each week, we assembled and delivered boxes with materials and hosted Zoom meetings to join in playing with the campers. Activity guides and videos are available in English, ASL, Spanish, and Arabic for anyone to use.

Weekly Themes
- Introduction
- LEGO
- OK Go Sandbox
- Games & Magic
- Science & Engineering
- Nature & Outdoors
- StoryCity
- Celebrations

Media Mentions
- University of St. Thomas Newsroom
- Kare11
- Fox9
- KSTP
After seeing teachers’ need for playful inspiration and virtual activities for remote learning, we created PLAYfest—a free, virtual conference aimed at educators and makers but open to anyone. It is a celebration of community, joy and creativity, failing better, and incorporation play into education.

Speakers talk about a wide range of wonder-inspiring topics, from LEGO to learning circus arts, to the importance of sleep, to making music inspired by a scrapbook found in a dumpster. The sessions of workshops cover hands-on subjects such as making short films, creating cardboard creatures, exploring OpenSCAD, playing with Zoom, leaving things undone, playing with circuits, and learning about exoplanets from NASA.

“I felt a part of the community even though I didn’t know anybody. I felt included from the very first minute even though it was all online. Everyone was so friendly and approachable… [My biggest takeaway from PLAYfest was] that you do not have to be a big cheese in order to create something others might find inspiring. It gave me a much needed boost to feel like I can go and develop something that one day might be worthy of being talked about at a future PlayFest:)

-Dorka, UK

“I was inspired by the energy and will certainly be incorporating more ways for students to express their creativity… The conference gave me starting blocks to develop new structures for students to show their creativity… PLAYfest was by far my favorite conference I’ve attended as a professional. I loved the variety of learning and spark of energy.”

-Alesia, Minnesota

“I want my students to feel the way I did at the end of the day—hungry to learn more and explore all the amazing people and ideas around us that are grounded in exploration, curiosity, and wonder!... The organization and planning of the Playful Learning Lab team delivered a program that was so completely engaging that I didn’t want it to end. I will be the first one in line to sign up when they offer #PLAYfest 2021!”

-Rachel, New Hampshire
We partnered with Grammy-winning rock band OK Go to create six music videos called “Art Together Now.” After OK Go wrote and recorded their song “All Together Now” alone in their homes during the COVID-19 lockdown, we collaborated with people around the world to collect music and colored video frame submissions. These submissions were compiled into six music videos (available on Youtube and other streaming platforms) to bring the world together in a time of separation, and they were released at Yuri’s Night 2021, a global celebration of space.
ART TOGETHER NOW

21 COUNTRIES
15,000 PARTICIPANTS
35 U.S. STATES

PARTNERS
- Animators/Designers
  - Wooyoung Kim
  - Disney imagineer Scott Cook
  - Vanessa Förmer
  - Megan Kim
  - James Belluci
  - Building Momentum
  - Luke Tozour
- OK Go
- Yuri's Night

SPONSORS
- Cognizant
- Morton

MEDIA MENTIONS
- Rolling Stone
- Berklee
- Issues in Science and Technology
- Mpls St. Paul Magazine
- Chicago Tribune
- A Journal of Musical Things
- the current
- The Awesomer
- Rock 95
- mxdwn
- St. Thomas Newsroom
- Tommie Media
We continued our residency at the Minnesota Children’s Museum, creating activity videos, designing exhibits, and conducting research. We are preparing to conduct research this summer on joyful, adult-centered museum experiences.

We created two activities and presented them at the virtual St. Paul Winter Carnival—a winter bingo card (one in the neighborhood/community and one for at home) and a StoryCity activity to create a winter festival for an imagined city.

We collaborated with the LEGO Foundation to create five activity videos for Playlist, their collection of fun learning activities for kids.

PLL members led a weekly, virtual afterschool technology program at Metro Deaf School in St. Paul for 10 Deaf or Hard of Hearing students. We also delivered materials such as Makey Makeys so students could work with PLL members to learn coding through Scratch.

StoryCity, a collaboration with the LEGO Foundation, is a platform that compiles stories told and communities built, offering building templates and prompts to inspire drawing, writing, and building. This project was made for self-isolating families to share in play together—helping kids learn and grow through play, creation, and experimentation—and be connected to a broader community. This year, we redesigned the website and added prompts and building templates to keep the creative juices flowing.

To give educators a break from virtual learning and to give the students something new, we offered to lead activities in virtual classrooms and did five classroom visits.

In response to requests from ELA educators, we began drafting ELA curriculum guides for OK Go Sandbox. We currently have five guides in progress and plan to make them available by the end of 2021.

We dropped off around 100 boxes with materials for activities at People Serving People in Minneapolis, a shelter for families experiencing homelessness.
III. MEDIA & ENGAGEMENT
## Playful Learning Lab
- followers: 348
- weekly impressions (avg): 352
- not applicable (no account)
- 7428 total YouTube views
- 310 videos from June 1, 2020 - May 31, 2021
- 794 mailchimp subscribers
- 6 newsletters sent

## OK Go Sandbox
- followers: 1708
- accounts reached weekly (avg): 1478
- followers: 2849
- weekly post reach (avg): 495
- followers: 2131
- weekly impressions (avg): 8827
- 338.1K total OK Go Sandbox YouTube views
- 9 OK Go Sandbox videos (on OK Go's YouTube)
- 1869 mailchimp subscribers
- 34 newsletters sent
IN THE MEDIA

23 media mentions from June 1, 2020 through May 31, 2021

2.3K @
total web and social mentions

20.2K
total web and social engagements
WEB ENGAGEMENT

Playful Learning Lab

→ 67,414 pageviews
→ 23,165 total visits
→ 15,011 unique visitors
→ 99 countries

OK Go Sandbox

→ 308,769 pageviews
→ 89,049 total users
→ 87,737 new users
→ 165 countries
Conferences Proceedings


Lab member Rachel Farah presented music visualization software Code + Chords at the virtual Maker Music Festival 2021.

Book Chapters

IV. FINANCES & SUPPORTERS
$146,158 total amount received in academic year 2020-2021 through grants, gifts, and sponsorships

LAB FINANCES
Thank you to
OUR 2020-2021 SUPPORTERS

MORTON SALT

The LEGO Foundation

Cognizant

Sara Lee Schupf

The Lund Family

The Lubin Family Foundation

Theisen Infinity Foundation