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Design play: Enhancing ideation skills through playful strategies in design education

Raksha Padaruth, Independent Institute of Education, Emeris, Vega School

Abstract

The ideation process is one of the most challenging components of the design process for students in Higher Education. Many students struggle with a lack of inspiration and confidence due to the need for perfection, which demotivates them to share or develop their ideas fully. Traditional ideation techniques often feel repetitive or restrictive, resulting in frustration and disengagement. This autoethnographic study draws from my personal experience as a design educator and ceramic artist to explore how play-based strategies can help reframe ideation as a joyful and exploratory process. This research is based on reflective practice and classroom observation, drawing on my many years of teaching experience with first-year design students, rather than relying on data collection from students. Through imaginative activities like the 'What If' ideation challenge, impromptu sketching, printmaking and clay-based story-telling activities, I observed how students are inspired to take risks, try new things and solve problems. This data highlights the different ways in which playful approaches influence idea generation, creative exploration, and confidence in design thinking. The findings show that incorporating play into the ideation process leads to more original and varied ideas. Students who engaged in play reported feeling less pressurised to come up with a "perfect" idea and enjoyed the freedom to explore. Play-based methods encouraged students to overcome planned thinking, resulting in new and unexpected results. This research is framed through constructionist and experiential learning theories (Papert 1980) and supported by the reflective practitioner model (Schon 1983). The research also positions play as a mindset shift that values process over perfection and exploration over fixed results. As a Hindu female artist, majoring in ceramics, I also introduce nature and ritual inspired approaches that integrate cultural knowledge into the ideation process. This study contributes to design education by offering a practical, inclusive and culturally responsive approach to the use of play in the classroom. This provides evidence that play is not just for children but can also be used as an important tool for unlocking creativity at any level. By shifting the focus from fixed outcomes to exploration and discovery, educators can help students develop creative confidence and problem-solving skills that will benefit them beyond the classroom. The findings encourage a rethinking of how ideation is taught, making it more interactive, inclusive, and engaging. This research has a strong focus on the subtheme of Design and Societal Realities, Impact and Cultural Preservation. Many design students struggle with ideation due to societal pressures relating to the need for perfection and having to deal with rigid educational structures that emphasise results over process. This playful approach can counteract these pressures by creating a more inclusive and exploratory learning environment that encourages risk-taking, collaboration, and creative confidence. By focusing on play as a strategy for enhancing ideation, this research contributes to the larger conversation about how design education must evolve to reflect societal realities, create meaningful impact, and support cultural preservation.

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Keywords: Autoethnography, ideation process, playful strategies, reflective practice, classroom observation

Introduction

The key component of design is ideation. It is the phase during which ideas are generated, concepts evolve, and the foundation for creativity is laid. *Ideation refers to the creative process of generating, developing, and communicating new ideas* (Brown 2009). Divergent and convergent thinking are both used, and a variety of options are explored before the most promising ones are chosen and refined.

However, in my experience as a design educator, I have seen that students frequently struggle with this process. When students are asked to generate ideas, there appears to be a noticeable tension and uncertainty. The very creativity that design education aims to foster is frequently stifled by high expectations, performance pressure, and fear of being judged. From a South African perspective, this challenge is intensified due to an educational system that places importance on textbook knowledge and rote learning rather than creative and critical thinking skills (Jansen 2009). As a result, students arrive at college with little prior knowledge or experience with experimental art practices.

As a female Hindu fine artist with a background in ceramics, a design lecturer, along with my love for nature, I bring a unique perspective to design education. Play, nature, culture, and material exploration are all fundamental components of my creative processes. My perspective on creativity and my interactions with my students in the classroom have been influenced by these factors. This research will be an autoethnographic narrative investigating how playful techniques can improve ideation in design education by reducing creative anxiety. It is both a reflection of my teaching journey and a study of the importance of play in creative learning. The following section outlines the methodological process used to generate and analyse insights.

Methodological approach

This research will be an autoethnographic narrative – a qualitative research method that combines personal narrative with cultural analysis and interpretation. According to Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011, p. 273), *"autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience"*. I drew from reflective journal entries, field notes from classroom sessions, and informal student comments during and after playful ideation activities. Immediately following each teaching session, I recorded observations, reflections, and classroom dynamics in a reflective teaching journal. I then revisited these entries to identify recurring patterns of student behaviour, moments of engagement, and instances where play seemed to unlock ideation.

Although I did not conduct formal interviews or surveys, I distilled insights thematically by clustering journal notes around key themes such as confidence, risk-taking, peer collaboration, and creative output. For example, several sessions highlighted students overcoming initial reluctance, which I grouped under the theme of *building confidence through play*. This informal but systematic reflection process allowed me to recognise connections between playful activities and shifts in student ideation.

All observations were made with an ethical awareness of student anonymity and boundaries, ensuring that while classroom interactions informed my reflections, individual students were not identified.

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Section 1: Rethinking rigidness: The limits of traditional ideation methods

Traditional ideation techniques like mind mapping, SCAMPER, and brainstorming often seem mechanical and instructional to students (Osborn 1953). These methods are often facilitated as step-by-step instructions. This can come across as uninspiring, especially for first year students who are at the onset of their creative journey. In my classes, I have observed that a lot of students fell into a vicious cycle of self-censorship, where the fear of presenting "bad" ideas led them to either skip the ideation phase and focus only on their final idea or present nothing at all. According to Williams (2002), self-censorship of creative ideas is the conscious choice to withhold or the unconscious inhibition of one's creative ideas in fear of criticism.

Many learning environments are assessment driven. This gives more importance to the outcome rather than the process, making this problem even more difficult. This focus unfortunately discourages students from taking risks or experimenting with ideas. Research supports this, indicating that when students experience pressure to meet academic standards, they frequently link creativity to anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi 1997).

I then realised that I needed to challenge the conventional method if I wanted to encourage students to ideate more freely and confidently. I began to consider how the ideation process could become fun and spontaneous by incorporating the concept of play.

Section 2: The value of play in creative education

Play is often associated with childhood. Play is seen as unproductive, unprofessional, and lacking in rigor, and is therefore not valued in higher education (Brown 2009) and is as a result, not well studied (Forbes & Thomas 2022). Literature on playful learning in teacher education, Boysen *et al.* (2022) established the value of playful learning but also the need for thorough study. Play encourages a mindset of experimentation and risk-taking which is vital in combating the ambiguity associated with the ideation phase in creative disciplines. As Brown (2009) emphasises, play is not just an activity but a state of mind that moulds curiosity and problem-solving. Similarly, Resnick (2017) argues that playful learning environments help individuals explore ideas without the fear of failure, leading to more inventive outcomes. Incorporating play in design education creates a safe space for experimentation, as design students often feel pressured to deliver refined outcomes. Play creates a relaxed environment and encourages learners to engage with materials and concepts in an imaginative way, whilst allowing students to be free from judgment. This enables them to welcome constructive criticism. Philosopher Johan Huizinga (1949) argues that play is a basic human activity that exists outside of everyday life and establishes its own set of norms and realities. Play therefore has the potential to create an extremely effective brainstorming environment.

The importance of learning via active participation and critical reflection is emphasised by reflective and constructionist learning theories. Donald Schön's concept of the "reflective practitioner" (1984) emphasises how professionals continuously assess and modify their process while learning by doing and thinking in action. According to Seymour Papert's constructionism (1980), students learn best when they are actively creating something that has meaning for them. In play-based learning students experience hands-on engagement, take risks, and welcome unexpected results. This naturally aligns with both viewpoints mentioned above. Play adds unexpected and thought-provoking moments of discovery, which makes learning dynamic and iterative. This method in design education helps students become active creators and thinkers rather than passive consumers of information. Students gain confidence and greater understanding of their creation.

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Section 3: Developing play-based ideation activities

Guided by the value of play, I began designing and using existing classroom activities that introduced elements of play into the ideation process. These included:

Play with clay and nature: Tactile symbolism and cultural memory

To begin my exploration of how play may aid ideation in design education, I experimented with an activity that reflected the different components of my identity: my Hindu heritage, my background in ceramics and my love for nature. This classroom activity was titled *Sacred Forms.* Instead of using specific ideation tools, students were invited to explore ideation through tactile play, cultural or ritual memory, and found natural materials. This activity was created for students who struggled to use traditional ideation techniques, allowing them the opportunity to experience a fun and sensory introduction to conceptual thinking.

Students were first instructed to take a quiet moment to reflect, thinking of an object, symbol or motif from their childhood, culture, or spiritual beliefs. This object had to have personal meaning to them. This was followed by a hands-on activity utilising air-dry clay and found objects like leaves, twigs, bark, seeds, and other textured objects collected from their personal environment. Students produced patterns, textures and form by pressing these materials into the clay. Students were discouraged from pre-planning or overanalysing but rather encouraged to welcome the unexpected. This according to Bateson and Martin (2013) is an essential component of creative play. These authors argue that play promotes flexibility and openness by creating room for surprise and uncertainty.

Different clay forms began to emerge-some abstract, some symbolic and representational. Throughout the process of moulding, students considered their emotions, thoughts and cultural experience. This theory relates to Ingold's (2013) perspective that making is a form of thinking, where ideas emerge from the engagement with materials rather than being pre-formed. The process was intuitive and engaging. Students loved the experience and reflected a feeling of calmness. A student remarked, "I forgot I was doing a class exercise, it just felt like playing". Once they had completed execution, they were asked to title or name their creation. Students then wrote a short narrative about the form and presented their outcome in small groups. This encouraged peer interaction and shared meaning-making.

This method of working with natural materials, specifically clay, helped students to reconnect with fond memories of home, family, or faith. Some students were inspired by Zulu beaded patterns and some mimicked traditional Shweshwe designs in their mark-making. One student shared how the imprint of a leaf reminded her of the mango leaves used in her family's prayer ritual-and her associated experience with this. This insight later inspired her project for creative development, in exploring her personal creative identity. Students were able to acknowledge the benefits of incorporating symbolism, ritual, and material forms that resonated with them in assisting with the ideation phase.

While conventional ideation techniques often rely on quick thinking and verbal articulation, this activity emphasised the value of sensory and culturally reflective play in generating ideas. As Gauntlett (2011) notes, creativity is not only about novelty but also about making meaning. This meaning is successfully achieved when students engage in play with materials that they can relate to or has personal meaning.

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This approach and my own experience as a Hindu female artist and design educator, shows that when ideation is framed as playful and personal, students can resonate with the experience, allowing them to be more likely to take risks, display confidence and produce ideas that are authentic.

Unlocking creativity through spontaneous drawing: Playful prompt

In one of my first-year Creative Development classes, I introduced a spontaneous drawing exercise as an introduction to the concept of creativity as well as an icebreaker. This test of creativity, known as the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking, was introduced by psychologist Ellis Paul Torrance in the sixties to administer a more creatively inclined IQ test (Artwork Archive 2025). Each student in my class was given a sheet of paper containing a simple, abstract shape (Figure 1). They were instructed to complete the drawing within four minutes. The time constraint was deliberate. This prevented students from overthinking or planning extensively. Instead, they were encouraged to draw instinctively. They could add text, invent a story or character, add humour or even extend their drawing beyond the border of the frame.

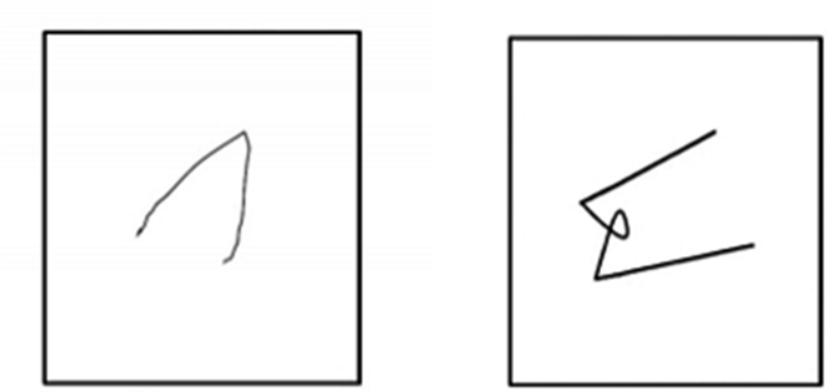

Figure 1: Abstract shape to complete the drawing (Artwork Archive 2025)

The purpose of this activity was to remove the initial anxiety that many students feel when faced with the "blank page" in creative tasks. It also facilitated divergent thinking by encouraging students to generate ideas quickly and freely. The constraints of a time limit, the ambiguous prompt and the freedom – no "wrong" answers – proved to be successful in unlocking their creativity. The students produced a variety of imaginative and creative outcomes. These included whimsical creatures and short narratives to symbolic and abstract interpretations of the line (Figures 2 and 3).

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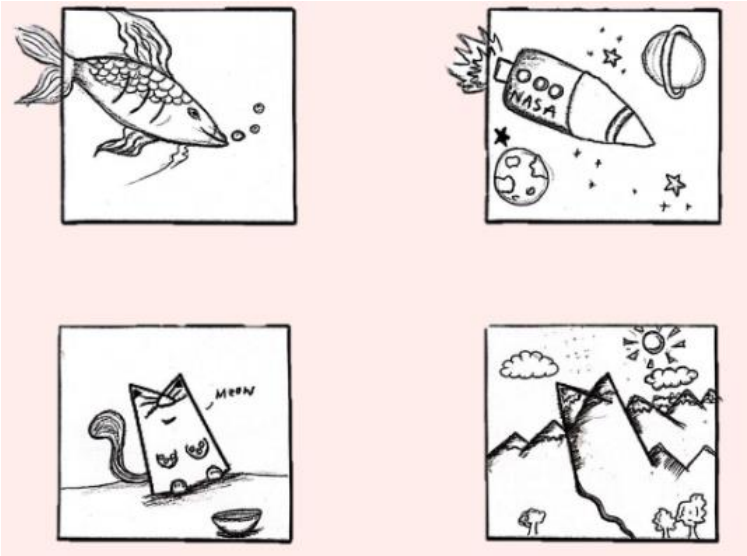

Figure 2: Student outcomes from the spontaneous drawing activity showing various interpretations of the same prompt (Padaruth 2025)

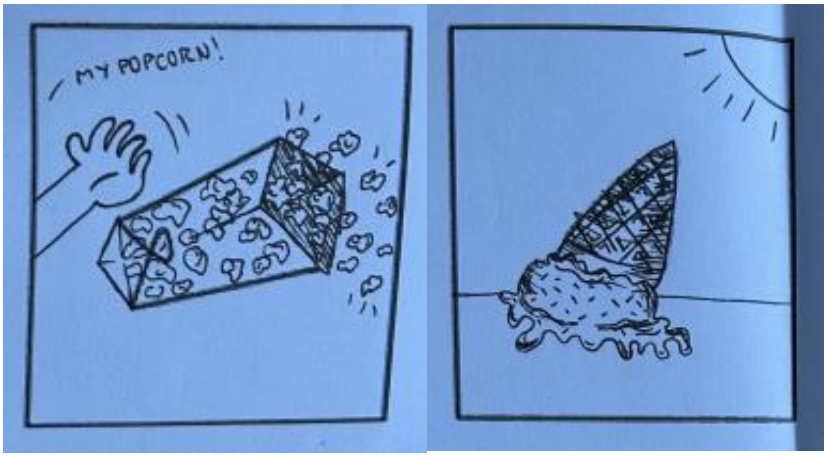

Figure 3: Student outcomes from the spontaneous drawing activity showing various interpretations of the same prompt (Padaruth 2025)

This method aligns with existing research in creative studies, which highlights the importance of constraint, spontaneity, and playful engagement in idea generation (Sawyer 2017). The time constraint prevented students from seeking perfection, supporting the idea that immediacy and play can result in more authentic creative expressions (Nijstad *et al.* 2010). This exercise enabled students to gain confidence in being intuitive by encouraging them to use their creative instinct, which is a key skill during the early stages of design ideation.

The students found the post-activity sharing session equally valuable. At first, the students were hesitant to showcase their work, so I began to show the first few examples and attempted to explain what I saw. The classroom was soon filled with laughter, curiosity, and surprise as students then began to showcase and explain their own work. The activity not only broke the social ice but was also able to create a culture of openness and experimentation. This informal, playful moment set the tone for deeper discussions regarding the creative mindset and risk-taking. These core themes continued to shape students' project development throughout the course.

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Design facilitators can assist students at the very onset of the creative process to develop a more adaptable and optimistic approach by introducing similar low-stakes, playful strategies. This drawing exercise showed how the most basic exercise can have a significant impact on students' confidence and ideation skills.

Imagination in motion: The "what if?" ideation game

To further explore play as a catalyst for creative ideation, I facilitated the "What If?" game. This quick exercise was designed to help students get past internal barriers and generate many ideas without passing judgment. Students had to come up with ideas for a creative contribution and were instructed to write as many "What if" statements as possible within the timeframe of ten minutes. The prompt was simple and open-ended: for example, *"What if I could sketch music?"* or *"What if objects had feelings?"* The objective was to foster a mindset of possibility through quantity and spontaneity rather than to develop a single strong idea.

To motivate students and create a sense of competition, I offered a slab of chocolate as a reward for the student who generated the most ideas. This small incentive increased the energy in the room. The simplicity of the task, along with the restricted time and reward, helped many students get rid of their fear of producing "bad" ideas. Since absurdity was not only accepted, but welcomed, many students even laughed at their own suggestions midway.

What I did notice during this activity was the students steady increase in confidence, particularly those who struggled with the ideation phase. Some of the more reserved or insecure students were at first apprehensive but observed how their peers eagerly embraced the activity. They appeared to be drawn in by the visible enthusiasm and momentum of the room, rather than retreating further. They began to write freely, mostly encouraged by the low-risk format and the absence of critique. They surprised themselves by how many ideas they produced at the end.

During the peer-sharing phase, the positive engagement was almost contagious. Laughter and affirmation filled the classroom as students shared their ideas. Some students shared similar thinking patterns and unexpected combinations that encouraged further discussion. My observation that students became less anxious aligns with Russ's (2004) findings that play reduces performance pressure and encourages imaginative thinking. Similarly, the peer-to-peer sharing observed reflects Amabile's (1996) argument that collaborative environments nurture intrinsic motivation and support creative risk-taking. The experience of being heard, and hearing others, highlighted the value of collective creativity. Poor performing students who were initially reluctant to participate, began to see that the sharing of ideas, no matter how unpolished, was not something to fear. Instead, they treated this as an opportunity to gain constructive feedback, whilst feeling validated.

This experience highlights the important role of low-stakes activities in improving the classroom dynamic. By placing emphasis on ideation as exploration rather than execution, the 'What If' activity created a safe and supportive classroom environment where risk-taking and creativity was shared. The activity also emphasised the role of play as a mindset, not just a method. Nurturing the confidence and curiosity of first year students is extremely important. As Resnick (2017) argues, cultivating a "creative learning spiral" through playful experimentation helps learners to imagine, create, share, reflect, and iterate, thereby fostering genuine participation in creative practice.

Found texture printing in illustration: Material play as ideation

In another related ideation-focused exercise, students in my first-year Illustration class participated in a hands-on printing exploration that promoted the combining of hand-rendered and digital outcomes.

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Pupils were asked to bring in found textured materials like bark, bubble wrap, mesh, leaves, scraps of fabric, and string. These found items were experimented with using paint, ink, sponges, rollers, and other printmaking tools.

Again, this activity approached ideation through material interaction, where students were encouraged to have the project brief requirements in mind when experimenting. In the activity (Figure 4a) they explored how texture, repetition, layering, and pattern could organically spark ideas. In this way, the act of doing became the thinking.

Figure 4a: Students printing with found materials such as leaves, string, and fabric to create layered textures with ink, wax crayons and paint (Padaruth 2025)

Figure 4b: Students printing with found materials such as leaves, string, and mesh to create layered textures with ink and paint (Padaruth 2025)

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This method (Figure 4b) aligns with Ingold's (2013) concept of "thinking through making", where ideas are formed through the interaction of physical form or material. This activity encouraged creative play in students who may have felt restricted by traditional ideation exercises. This reinforced the idea that tactile play can unlock different cognitive pathways.

This activity's use of found natural materials can be linked to traditional craft practices, where resourcefulness and material improvisation have been the foundation for creativity in many African cultures (Kasfir 2000). Local traditional art is often created from the surrounding natural environment to either tell a story or express culture. Students have therefore unknowingly echoed these indigenous modes of ideation by exploring this process, welcoming the influence of one's culture into the contemporary classroom.

This activity also created a very relaxed in-class atmosphere. Students moved about freely to other workstations. They shared materials and tools, whilst discussing techniques and textures which they had spontaneously achieved. These observations align with current research on experiential learning which suggests that creativity is developed when learners can test, reflect, and adapt ideas through real-world tasks (Kolb 2015).

For introvert students that struggle with idea generation, this physical activity offered a different approach to creativity. A few commented informally that they had "never thought of printing like this" whist others planned to scan their prints to "turn them into digital textures". One student, who had struggled to develop a concept, remarked "I'm definitely scanning this – it looks like something I could build a whole background with", holding up a richly layered print. This visual evidence supported my reflective notes on the way tactile play facilitated idea generation, whilst echoing Ingold's (2013) view that cognition emerges through material engagement, confirming that play-based making activates embodied forms of knowing.

The activity further reinforced the idea that ideation can, and often should begin with sensory discovery, which can later be refined into purposeful design outcomes.

Conclusion

Redesigning ideation through play

The classroom activities included here highlights the effectiveness of play in generating ideas in design education. Though they may appear simple and straightforward, impromptu drawing, creating wild "What If?" scenarios, and experimenting with found-object mark-making all assist in changing the student's negative mindset about creativity. These activities allowed students the opportunity to experience the iterative processes of idea generation and development, whilst having fun.

Students that previously had difficulty coming up with ideas showed greater confidence because of these playful interventions. They discovered that there is more to being creative than just being talented or coming up with great ideas. Creativity also involves taking chances, being curious and able to try new things. Students began to realise that ideation was an evolving process, and one should not just focus on the result. This process included experimentation, making mistakes and peer-sharing. This imagination and freedom are essential in an educational setting that is frequently dominated by performance pressures and assessment rubrics.

When students witnessed the advantages of collaborative ideation, peer-to-peer feedback was welcomed. Students who were more reserved started to participate.

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This research also highlights the importance of material engagement in the ideation phase. In the South African context, where students come from diverse cultural backgrounds, it is important to allow them to incorporate their own stories and cultural influences into the design process, thus allowing for a more inclusive learning environment.

While this study is grounded in the South African context, the challenges of creativity under pressure, rigid assessment structures, and perfectionism are global issues (Sawyer 2017). Educators across diverse geographies face similar tensions in balancing structure and exploration. Integrating culturally responsive, play-based strategies therefore offers a broader model for ideation support in design education globally.

The integration of playful strategies and reflective ideation activities in curriculum design could shift design education towards more process-driven, student-centred models. Such approaches would encourage iterative exploration rather than product-focused assessment. Further research could explore how these strategies may be embedded within assessment frameworks and lecturer training to support broader pedagogical reform. In doing so, design education would be able to nurture graduates who are confident, adaptable, and equipped with the exploratory mindsets required in an ever-evolving creative industry.

While these recommendations point to systemic reform, the insights presented in this paper emerged from a deeply personal, practice-based exploration. Autoethnography is positioned as a useful methodology in design pedagogy research, because despite the lack of formal data collection, this study produced insightful findings through observation, lived experience, and reflective practice.

Welcoming play into classroom practice can therefore assist in fostering more resilient and holistic design thinkers. For this reason, ideation should not be limited or confined to the sketchbook or the screen, instead it should be activated through movement, tactility, sharing and memory. I am hopeful that this research will inspire educators and serve as a reminder that we can (and should) create learning spaces that encourage innovative risk-taking and ideation through playful, embodied, and sensory ways of thinking.

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