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What is Playful Learning? Examining Playful Voices Across Boundaries in Higher Education Pedagogy

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**Research Domain:** Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

**Abstract:** This paper examines a polyphony of conceptualizations of playful learning across disciplinary and professional boundaries in higher education pedagogy. Methodologically framed by co-creation with practitioners and qualitative inquiries, the paper reports on vastly different and diverse conceptualizations of playful learning in comparable spatial, temporal and contextual educational settings. Teachers from teacher education and social education at a Danish university college describe and articulate playful learning through a variety of perspectives, themes, theories, and ideologies. However, they all know what playful learning is or could be, but they know it in different ways. This frames potentials and challenges in developing and experimenting with a playful higher education boundary-crossing pedagogy, which is discussed through perspectives on tensions between shared and multivocal language and struggles between diversity and structure. Thus, conceptualizing playful learning across disciplinary and professional boundaries is of importance to both the pedagogical and collaborative applications and implications in higher education.

**Paper: What is Playful Learning? Examining Playful Voices across Boundaries in Higher Education Pedagogy**

### Introduction

This paper examines a polyphony of conceptualizations of playful learning across disciplinary and professional boundaries in higher education pedagogy. The motivation and relevance of this paper are to discuss playful learning as a phenomenon that is continuously conceptualized, made and unmade through a diversity of voices and varieties that enriches and challenges application for boundary-crossing higher education pedagogy.

## Methods

The research project is methodologically guided by Design-Based Research (DBR) as a flexible and theory-driven approach recognized as iterative, collaborative, integrative, pragmatic, and grounded in theory and real-world context (Barab & Squire, 2004; Andersson & Shattuck, 2012). This paper draws empirically on interviews and co-creational methods with practitioners across teacher education and social education at a Danish university college in designing and evaluating an interprofessional and playful educational course. The empirical material is from 8 design workshops (ea. 2-3 hours) along with 15 dialogically inspired qualitative interviews (ea. 1 hour) (Brinkmann & Tanggaard, 2015; Tanggaard, 2009).

The research focus is on the importance of both shared and diverse conceptualizations and languages across disciplinary and professional boundaries for understanding and collaborating on pedagogical interventions. This paper examines a polyphony of playful voices with inspiration in dialogic language philosophy (Bakhtin, 1981; Shotter, 2009) and how these voices engage in continuous dialogical tensions.

## Results

The results are focused on two perspectives: Conceptualizations of playful learning and play theory.

Throughout the qualitative inquiries, the conceptualizations of playful learning in generally comparable spatial, temporal and contextual settings are vastly different. For example, one teacher in social education articulates playful learning as a didactical development project, for another, it is playful pedagogies embedded in higher education teaching. For one teacher educator playful learning in higher education is respectful of the aesthetics of play while expanding on its pedagogical applications, while another finds it a contemporary educational concept aimed at developing a didactical toolbox. In the empirical material, the diversity of playful learning is a key factor of individually meaningful higher education pedagogy, while at the same time expressing a longing for shared conceptualizations and languages of play. This illuminates a continuous tension between centrifugal and centripetal forces (Bakhtin, 1981) with playful learning as a polyphonic and multivocal phenomenon opposing hopes of a shared language in the application in higher education pedagogy.

When examining shared play theory that influences the conceptualizations of playful learning, multiple perspectives are again present. For example, one informant describes it through Johan Huizinga (1938) as free, open-ended and adult play in learning activities, one discusses Helle Marie Skovbjerg (2016) and the application of play moods in higher education pedagogy, another approaches it through Roger Caillois (1958) as types of play of relevance in teaching, some present it as collaborative immersion and flow through Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1971), while other points towards John Dewey (1910) with playfulness and seriousness as perspectives on playful collaboration and knowing. They all know what playful learning is or could be, but they know it in different ways, to slightly paraphrase Annemarie Mol (2015). The Bakhtinian perspective further illustrates the polyphony - however, the diverse and different voices that engage with each other dialogically also long for structure and shared languages for playful learning in higher education.

## Discussion

Hong, Falter and Fecho (2016) describe a 'tensional approach' - also drawing on Bakhtin - for data analysis, and articulates, that "we need language to be both unified and individual. It is not a question of one force or the other; there should be relative equilibrium between the tensions." (2-3). In balancing this equilibrium we seek some shared understanding to guide communication and pedagogical development, although meaning and conceptualization dynamically shift with various situations and contexts. This draws attention to how playful learning is enacted differently in similar educational and pedagogical environments and the potential challenges and complexity of intervening with and implementing playful learning in higher education pedagogy if the discussed polyphony of voices is instead a cacophony of conflictual and tensional varieties. Finally, this apparent tension between equally important longing for shared structure and language in contrast with the individual and diverse perspectives is also a matter of tensions between the amorphous and clarity of playful learning. Danish philosopher, Knud Ejler Løgstrup describes in "Art and Ethics" (1961) that the formless potentially inhibits while structures support new thinking and creativity. Thus, striking a temporary balance of multivocal unity might support collaboration on playful learning across boundaries in experimenting with and transforming higher education pedagogy.

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