

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Playing in a Pandemic: Lessons for Higher Education Teaching and Research

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Research Domain: Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract: This session will report on a funded study (2019-2021) into the use and value of play in higher education, supported by the Imagination Lab Foundation. This is a charitable and not-for-profit organisation interested in the intersections between the sciences, arts, imagination, play and management. The investigation is framed by play theory and uses Sutton-Smith's Seven Rhetorics of Play as a key touchpoint. It explores educator perceptions and experiences of play in tertiary learning and research and provides evidence from universities and institutions internationally. I will outline the aims, methodology, headlines & outputs from my investigation, and identify key benefits and barriers associated with play in HE. Having gathered data through the pandemic I will argue that the place and importance of play in HE shifted radically during this time. I will suggest that our experiences provided us with insights which could guide how we shape academic scholarship in the future.

Paper: Research into play for early years, primary education and childhood development is long established. Investigation into play for adult learning, particularly at university, is far newer.

As one of a small number of playful scholars in this emergent area I have focussed on creative, playful and alternative approaches to academic practice (e.g. James & Brookfield, 2014; James, 2019; James & Nerantzi, 2019). This study draws on prior work, and that of others (e.g. Whitton, 2018; Whitton & Moseley, 2019; Toft Norgard et al) to explore the use and value of play in higher education. It ran from 2019 to 2021 (with an extension now to 2022 for dissemination) and was funded by the [Imagination Lab Foundation](#). This Swiss-based, independent and not-for-profit entity supports scholarship complementing traditional management concepts and theories with ideas from the arts, sciences, imagination and play.

The aims of this study are

1. to gather evidence of play in HE a) across all disciplines and b) with regard to management theories and concepts
2. to examine participant perceptions of the value of play.

The study is strongly rooted in pedagogy and in play theory (including Brown, 2009; Bateson & Martin, 2013; Huizinga, 1938; Kane, 2004; Sicart, 2017; Sutton-Smith, 1997), to which it also contributes. A key theoretical touchpoint is Sutton-Smith's framework of Seven Rhetorics of Play (1997). This is an original aspect to the study as Sutton-Smith did not discuss these in an HE context nor has he (or anyone else, to my knowledge) related them to university learning and research. This study correlates the Rhetorics to narratives about play at university and future work will explore whether they need further elaboration to encompass HE.

It is a mixed-method, qualitative study with a relativist ethos. As I am working with the perceptions and realities of participants it is not appropriate for me to judge these as true or false. Rather I curate and interpret them as representative of many truths. To do this I have adopted a plural coding approach, combining descriptive, In vivo and values coding to pull out key examples, themes and voices. In addition a set of versus codes has been organically generated which I have translated into a series of polarities. These reflect the complexity of perceptions concerning play in HE.

Findings from this investigation are synthesised from questionnaires (112 respondents), interviews (65), literature review, experience and empirical data. Coming from international contributors they offer insights into, and examples of, the growth of playful/play-based learning in HE. They reveal richness and diversity, with some strong points of quasi-consensus and many others of variation and contradiction. Positive outcomes of play include heightening motivation, improving adaptability, stretching thinking, building relationships, grasping difficult material and forging connections. All are essential during and following a time of disruption, adversity and uncertainty, and when new envisaging is required. Participants also relate their adoption of play to their own values as educators and researchers; generating powerful messages as to what this means for their personal and professional activities and identities.

From analysis of the data I contend that playful academic practice and research is more widespread than we realise. I offer evidence of deep passion and commitment to academic practice and scholarship which contributors believe is enhanced by play. I also identify key barriers and resistances. Play is often viewed with suspicion, for reasons which I ascribe largely to fear, misunderstanding of play itself and assumptions about 'proper' education and research.

Conducting this research in a pandemic meant that I had to completely rethink how I would operate, as my plan to travel and host events could not be implemented. I and others had to find the

inventive and agile ways referred to in the conference invitation, to connect online and at a distance through play. The value of so doing is illustrated by the ways that study participants have continued to use play in difficult circumstances. The importance play has for our psychological, social and emotional well-being is underscored. Playful enquiry is important, not only for its autotelic value, but also as a means of appreciating the importance of other important things. Play as an enabler of connection comes across particularly strongly in this study. In our academic communities this relates to subjects, fields, practices, peers, expectations, questions and to how we can navigate our academic and research futures. This paper will provide conference participants with data, questions and points for reflection to enable them to review the place and value of play in their own scholarship and research.

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