

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Making Space for Fun in Higher Education Learning and Teaching: (Re)connecting Educators and Learners?

Laura Barnett¹

¹*University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey, United Kingdom*

Research Domain: Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract:

The term 'fun' in relation to HE L&T is not only heavily cited in pedagogic studies, but it is a word used frequently by teachers to describe their teaching and the learning experience of their students. However, there is a lack of theoretical investigation about what is fun for students and teachers in respect to learning and teaching, and how it is experienced by them. Nonetheless, fun can have pedagogical value to teachers and learners alike (Whitton and Langan, 2019), making it an area worthy of further academic study. This paper contributes to this area by drawing upon data from an empirical mixed-methods study using a 'student-staff partnership' approach (Healey, Flint and Harrington 2014). Using data from the study, including a student survey, student focus groups and interviews with HE teachers and playful learning experts this paper contributes to further understandings about fun and outlines its critical value in HE.

Paper: Introduction and Literature Review

There is a considerable body of literature about the pedagogy of play, playful learning, games-based learning and the gamification of learning in HE (see: Brown 2009; Sutton-Smith 2015; James and Nerantzi 2019; Arnab 2020). There is also a growing academic community and well-established networks of practitioners (e.g. Playful Learning Network and Professors at Play) who adopt playful practice in HE teaching. Together they show the powerful impact these approaches can have upon students learning (e.g. enhanced student engagement). However, upon an initial reading of the literature about play and games, one might be led to think that if these approaches are applied in teaching then fun will be had by students in their learning. Similarly, many pedagogic studies use the words play, fun, joy and enjoyment interchangeably which could reinforce assumptions that play equals fun in student learning. This is problematic because the term fun becomes used casually and uncritically which may not offer a fair representation of a student's learning experience, particularly

whether they are having fun.

Given that there could be implications for students if we make assumptions about what is fun for them, how they experience it and their perceived value of it – this study attempts to address this by exploring the under-researched area of fun in HE L&T. There are however some exceptions to the literature where fun in HE has been explored. This includes McManus and Furnham (2010) who attempted to produce a taxonomy of fun amongst undergraduates. Whitton and Langan (2019) also explored student perceptions of fun in HE. Ferguson et al. (2020) looked at teacher perspectives to explore concepts, classifications and taxonomies of fun. However, these studies do not necessarily bring together student and staff perspectives that could explore more richly together the value of fun. Given the potential pedagogical value, this research attempts to contribute to these understandings by empirically exploring students and teachers notions of fun. This led to the following research questions that underpin this study:

1. What is fun for students in relation to their HE learning experiences?
2. What are HE teacher perceptions of fun in L&T?
3. What is the relationship between playful learning and fun in HE?

Methodology

This research project adopted a student-staff partnership approach (Healey, Flint and Harrington 2014). The rationale for this was to get student input from the outset to shape the project and avoid reinforcing further any assumptions about what is fun for students in relation to their learning. The study commenced with a survey aiming to capture UK student's perceptions of fun and its value in relation to their learning experiences. In total 78 students responded from 3 different universities. The survey captured mostly quantitative data to gather initial student perceptions, but also incorporated qualitative responses to help shape themes and questions that were then followed up in student focus group interviews. At the time of writing two student focus groups have taken place with 7 students. The study also aimed to capture HE teachers and playful learning experts views about fun in relation to L&T and to date 9 interviews have taken place with them to explore their ideas. It is hoped that through the qualitative thematic analysis of these interviews that are due to take place, this study will be able to shed some empirical insight about shared themes and distinctions between students and teachers about notions of fun in L&T and its value in HE.

Initial thoughts and next steps

With the research project well-underway, it is anticipated that this study can bring together some empirical insights from both students and teachers about perceptions of fun and its value in HE L&T. As there is an absence of research that combines both student and teacher perceptions, it is hoped that this study can offer a valuable contribution to this area. Initial preliminary thoughts based upon the data collection so far suggest that both students and teachers observe that fun is a complex, loaded and contested term because it can be a highly individual experience. Nonetheless, it became apparent through the data that students and teachers recognise the value of fun and how it can have positive outcomes for both parties, including enhancing positive learning experiences, creating

opportunities to build connections and community between students and teachers and they agreed that fun has a rightful place in HE. It is hoped that this research has the capacity to shed new light on student learning experiences and encourage HE teachers to reflect seriously upon how notions of fun can enhance their pedagogic practice.

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