

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Building bridges or barriers? A critical examination of the playfulness of serious play

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

**Abstract:** Over the past two decades, competition in the UK Higher Education environment has grown increasingly high-pressured, with a steady increase in use of metrics, leading to instrumental behaviour and stifling innovation. Despite this, LEGO® Serious Play® (LSP) has emerged in recent years as a creative methodology that uses building bricks and group work for participants to respond to questions or challenges. Its use in UK Higher Education has grown in recent years in parallel to the evolution of Playful Learning as an emerging pedagogical approach, but despite their surface similarities, the philosophies underpinning these two approaches are in opposition. In this discussion piece, we explore these contrasting philosophical perspectives, problematise notions of seriousness, and consider the theoretical foundations for play and learning in Higher Education.

**Paper: Introduction**

The increasingly neoliberal and performative UK HE sector, with its focus on measurement, can lead to instrumental behaviour by both teachers and learners (Whitton and Langan 2017). In this high-pressure environment it is unsurprising that those outcomes that are measured become prioritised in a teaching context, leading to a focus on TEF metrics such as degree outcomes and student satisfaction. This leaves little appetite in the curriculum for pedagogic innovation or risk-taking in novel or original approaches to learning and teaching (Maisuria and Cole 2017).

Despite this, one teaching approach growing in its use across the sector is the LEGO® Serious Play® (LSP) methodology, which uses LEGO® building blocks to facilitate discussion and creative problem-solving. Serious Play uses a structured approach, which facilitators are expected to follow, based on clearly defined procedures. To become an LSP facilitator and be approved to follow the methodology requires five days of training, at considerable cost. Juxtaposed to this is the wider field of Playful Learning in Higher Education, which offers a series of playful tools, tactics, and techniques to facilitate active learning and engagement (Whitton 2018). Underpinning the Playful Learning philosophy however, are ideas of openness that are potentially at odds with LSP's closed programme. In this paper, we will explore the two approaches, consider the degree to which they are

aligned, and whether the mismatch of underpinning philosophies is problematic.

### **Playful learning in the magic circle**

The field of Playful Learning in Higher Education has emerged within the last decade, as an extension to work in game-based learning to encompass a wider range of playful approaches beyond games, and particularly beyond digital. Nørgård and colleagues (2017) developed an initial signature pedagogy (Shulman 2005) that identifies the surface, deep, and implicit structures of playful learning in HE. In this model, the surface structures are identified as the 'game' elements, such as ease of entry and explicit progression, appropriate levels of challenge, and use of game mechanics. At a deep pedagogic level, there are several 'play' elements identified, such as active engagement, collaboration, imagination, surprise, and novelty. Finally, the model describes the underpinning philosophical assumptions of the approach, comprising the implicit or 'playful' structures. These are a willingness to adopt a lusory attitude (Suits 2014), a willingness to suspend disbelief and enter into the spirit of play, accepting the rules of the playful world; adoption of democratic values and openness; intrinsic motivation; and acceptance of risk-taking and failure.

It is these values that are core to the idea of playful learning; while the tools and pedagogic techniques are important, the philosophical background is key. The theoretical construct of the 'magic circle' (Huizinga 1955; Salen and Zimmerman 2004) is useful for understanding the benefits of playful learning; it is a notional idea of a safe game space, co-constructed by the players, in which the rules of the real world no longer apply. Key to this playspace of the magic circle is that players are intrinsically motivated to enter voluntarily, embrace a lusory attitude, and can make mistakes without fear of failure. It is these aspects of play that advocates of playful learning consider to be so crucial to learning.

### **The challenge of serious play**

LSP is underpinned by a broad range of theoretical ideas, three identified by McCusker (McCusker 2019) are: first, constructionism, which suggests that through developing physical models we aid understanding by making the intangible tangible (Papert and Harel 1991); second, by challenging participants to stretch their skillset, participants enter a mental state called 'flow', where they experience intrinsic motivation and high engagement (Csikszentmihalyi 1996); and third, through sharing stories of their models, participants learn through using metaphor in storytelling (Geary 2011).

While the pedagogic theory justifying the approach aligns with much of the literature on game-based learning (Gee 2003), the philosophical underpinning is less explicit, but much can be inferred from a model that is based on privately provided facilitation training. McCusker (2019) suggests that there is no conflict between the idea of play and the activities which take place within an LSP workshop,

drawing on Huizinga's (1955) notions of freedom in play. However, we argue that wider consideration is needed about how an approach that is based on closed practices, and ultimately profit-driven, fits within the philosophical framing of Playful Learning as a whole, with its emphasis on openness and democracy.

In considering LSP through the lens of playful learning however, we see similarities and differences. One similarity is that the metaphor-rich world of an LSP class may invoke a ludic attitude amongst participants (Suits 2014), in which they are willing to suspend disbelief and enter into the spirit of the session, which has a set of clear rules. However, given that LSP may be used to tackle serious questions, the amount to which this can be described as 'play' is difficult to define. As in playful learning approaches, the rules of LSP try to create a democratic situation where every voice is equal and, through the use of time-bounded activities, intrinsic motivation is enhanced. Where the comparison fails is on the beliefs, values and assumptions that justify each of the approaches. The very seriousness of Serious Play is at odds with the ludic nature of Playful Learning and opens the question of whether play in Higher Education must by necessity be serious to be acceptable, and whether this undermines the inherent pedagogic value of the magic circle.

## Conclusions

The use of LSP has value in Higher Education, and can generate opportunities within the magic circle for exploring possibilities and ideas within safe spaces. However, it is important to recognise a fundamental philosophical misalignment between LSP and Playful Learning. The core approaches used in the LSP methodology are not new, and have been used for years in therapy and school education using physical tools such as Meccano or Play Doh. Monetaring and mythologizing the LEGO® brick as a unique constructionist learning tool is a clear capitalist strategy, which we argue is at odds with the fundamental ethos of play.

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