

Knowledge Studies in Higher Education 14

Laura Baecher  
Lindsay Portnoy *Editors*

# Playful Pedagogy in Higher Education

Research and Cases from across  
the Disciplines

 Springer

# **Knowledge Studies in Higher Education**

Volume 14

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Laura Baecher • Lindsay Portnoy  
Editors

# Playful Pedagogy in Higher Education

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## Foreword: Play It Forward

We look to playful higher education, hoping that it might help us (re)connect in deeper ways with each other, our disciplines, and the world. In my own work with play philosophies, I see play carrying a promise for higher education futures to spring from curiosity, creativity, and communality (Nørgård, 2021) and to nurture democracy and belonging both inside and outside our institutions (Nørgård & Toft, forthcoming). Playfulness has the capacity to (re)invigorate pedagogy as a passionate and compassionate practice (Nørgård et al., 2022). We look in order to know whether it might be possible to be playful in higher education. If it might be possible for students to have playful study practices? If it might be possible for teachers to practice their disciplines in playful ways? And if it might be possible to find ways to embrace an ethos of playfulness that engages higher education as something more than preparing for future work life, acquiring usable skills, or ensuring socio-economic growth.

As the renowned Danish designer, architect, and cultural thinker Poul Henningsen (1894–1967) put it many years ago in his writings on the importance of play, art, culture, “uselessness,” and laziness, the purpose of education and human existence lies beyond “the useful”: “Academic freedom, artistic freedom and playful freedom is similar in that they are beyond useful competences, objectives and aims. They can lead to practical results, but it is not of any concern for the higher purpose, the passion, or the joyfulness of creative freedom” (Henningsen, 2019, p. 20, my translation). Today, however, we often find ourselves, higher education and our disciplines caught up in instrumental regimes of usefulness where only the arduous, agonizing, and profitable work is considered morally just. This in turn makes the question of play and playfulness deadly serious: If we take the playful spirit out of people, we in turn kill culture, stunt the imagination, and constrict our human spirit (Henningsen, 2019). This also goes for education. In education, play is not leisure or a remedy to help us survive in a broken system. Playful higher education is not about “taking a break” but about “breaking out” and finding our way back to the inner purpose of education and our disciplines.

When the instrumental but unessential or the useful but meaningless in our lives become more important than the meaningful, essential, and worth-while, then we risk losing the purpose of education. And, in turn, dim our students' futures, horizons, and dreams as they themselves become instrumental and "useful." They and we stop believing that play with disciplines, knowledge, problems, futures, and life-worlds is a viable way to keep us free from being subdued into regimes of employability, economic worth, and petty-bourgeois thinking (Henningesen, 2019). Play should not fit into education, work, or society where life itself becomes a duty. Quite the contrary. Education, work, and society should feel like and be experienced like play ...why else do we live if not to feel alive? In this way, playful "uselessness" is the insistence to do something "other" than what society or people in power think is "useful" for us to do.

In higher education, we come to know ourselves as professionals through disciplinary play and through disciplinary play we practice the art of becoming and being professional in human ways. This book you have before you pay tribute to this by way of fusing the spirit of pedagogy and playfulness within the disciplines. It serves as both a resource and a foundation for us to draw and lean on, helping us to renew our commitment to the purpose and values of higher education, to bring about a world where we can think, study, and become ourselves fully and with joy through playing it forward. Pedagogies and disciplinary practices in education should pave the way for enjoyable, passionate, and playful lives rather than try and squash such "childish" dreams, foolishness, and spectacles—accused of being naïve, useless, immature, or lazy. But such "laziness" or "useless work" is not the same as the absence of duty, responsibility, or diligence. Rather, it is something we are often accused of when we dare to do something "other" than what society or people in power wants us to do.

However, playful pedagogies are no longer a naïve or utopian prospect. They are already here, alive and unfolding within education across the globe. Over the last decades there has been a steadily growing interest in and experimentation with playful pedagogies in higher education. Books, projects, practices, and networks on the subject are taking root and thriving to make education more playful and make new forms of higher education interactions and experiences possible. Students, teachers, researchers, developers, and leaders in higher education are now working together to "play it forward." Playful people, as is also present in this book, are joining hands to move us playfully forward and toward fuller and more humane pedagogies and student experiences. Playful pedagogies has the possibility of (re)evoking the purpose and (re)claiming a space of wonder, desire, curiosity, imagination and daydreaming within higher education (Nørgård, 2021). They carry within them "the power of play"—ideas, emotions, and activities of powerful intensity that playfully invites us to discover, explore, and experiment with the strange, inexplicable, or unknown within our disciplines. And to make them and us come alive, feel alive, and keep on being alive in higher education through taking up this invitation.

Even though the playful spirit of education and our disciplines might be invisible in our institutions today, we are searching. *Playful Pedagogy in Higher Education: Research and Cases Across the Disciplines* is a part of this search and highlights ways for us to pave the way for more imaginative, passionate, curious, creative, and aesthetic lives through playful pedagogies. It underlines the intimate fusion of sense and sensibility in education and highlights the inseparability of thinking heads, practicing hands, and beating hearts within our disciplines. Through opening ourselves and our disciplines to the spirit of play, we allow ourselves to experience how our “coming to know” within our disciplines is something we play forward in our thinking, practices, and relationships with the world. Here, being playful allows us to experience deeper and more existential bonds with our disciplines when playing with concepts, discovering new practices through play, or engaging playfully with our vocation. Through playful pedagogy, our disciplines become playfellows and playful companions throughout life. In play we can come to feel at one with our discipline and experience our discipline as an intimate part of ourselves. It invites us to play ourselves forward as human beings in education and allow our disciplines to play themselves forward in us as part of our being human.

*Playful Pedagogy in Higher Education: Research and Cases Across the Disciplines* describes a pathway toward new possible educational futures. It shows us that we have the capacity and practices to organize and transform our educational systems to be geared toward flourishing, well-being, and the celebration of joyful and playful educational lives. It shows us a way of manifesting wonder and curiosity through playful experimentation and creativity. Where the heart, heads, hands, and habits of play and of study meet and melt into each other. To find purpose and meaning in the core values of play and playfulness: imagination, wonder, freedom, courage, sensitivity, collaboration, experimentation, compassion, friendship, and equality (Nørgård et al., 2022).

At every turn and chapter, the book invites us to imagine education and higher education futures differently. To see education not only as a stepping stone toward employability, socio-economic growth, or the acquisition of “usable” skills but as a playful exploration and unveiling of relationships with knowledge, each other, and the world. And that such relationships—when we allow ourselves to play with them and be played by them—makes higher education and its disciplines not separate from but part of wider and living systems, cultures, and societies. The awareness of such possibilities is growing. We are not fated to the dystopia of the educational futures put before us. The choice, as always when it comes to education, is in the hands of those living in education—leaders, researchers, developers, teachers, and students.

The reader looking for such possibilities, pathways, insights, or inspiration will find them here in abundance. This book is for everyone with a passion for playfulness and playful higher education and is written by people that themselves are working to evoke the spirit of play and playfulness in pedagogy and within the disciplines. It is a book of playful hope and conviction that backs up the belief of

practitioners in higher education that a profound playful transformation is already on its way from the bottom up. In it we find playful adventures and adventurers filled with a passion for play and pedagogy. A necessary adventure that points us away from the “grimdark present of neoliberal higher education” toward more “hopepunk and humane futures of higher education” (Nørgård, 2022). The book charts pathways of playful pedagogy in higher education across the disciplines in which we find joyful, hopeful, and powerful responses to the current grimdark trouble higher education finds itself in. With generosity of pedagogical intellect and spirit, the authors engage with their disciplines and higher education. They show us that for every discipline there is a playful world. And in doing so, they help us play it forward.

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Rikke Toft Nørgård

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# Introduction

When Lindsay and I met, close to 15 years ago at a university where we were both professors of education, we connected instantly. We celebrated and included each other in faculty development activities we were engaged in, cheered each other on, and supported each other through many of the absurdities of higher education. Connection continues to fuel us and we see possibilities in every interaction, every “lesson plan.” Lindsay went on to write two books that inspire teachers to think in fun and gamelike ways (2019, 2020), and Laura explored lots of ways to make teaching become more playful for more professors, which led to a series of webinars hosted during the pandemic (2021–2022) on playful teaching in higher education, attended by thousands of academics from around the world. This series generated this edited collection; we wanted to continue to elevate the voices of the professors who were experimenting, often in isolation, and who also were fueled and energized by that sense of connection to each other and the possibilities of bringing more playful approaches into higher education.

The authors in this book are mostly located in US contexts but also represent Canada, the United Kingdom, and Spain, and the research and cases in the book are therefore generally located within these settings. Therefore, the notions of “play” and the context in which these are explored is somewhat limited, and perhaps does not encompass the plurality of possibilities of what play might look and feel like in pedagogy from diverse cultural standpoints and geographical, social, and political spaces. We acknowledge this and hope that as the idea of play in higher education continues to expand that we may learn from international colleagues and continue to build a network of playful professors as has been built through organizations such as the Professors at Play and the Playful University Platform.

Indeed, before we proceed we believe it is important to underscore, especially for those currently at the periphery of this movement, that an essential shift is taking place in the higher education landscape. Although attention to play in higher education is not a new phenomenon, at least in a wider community sense it has become increasingly embraced. As we note above, organizations that are connecting playful professors have harnessed the pandemic turn to technology and need to engage and re-engage students, but also as a praxis situated (perhaps in checkmate) to the type

of expedient and faceless education too often valorized by a business model of the university. “Within the neoliberal university, scholarship, education, students, academic staff, and practices are subordinated to managerial imperatives. University educators are denigrated and displaced by colonising neoliberal practices that systemically invalidate and invisibilise academic work” (Morley, 2023, p. 1). We see play as a talk back to neoliberalism and embrace this playful pedagogical movement not only in its practical applications but as a heuristic for approaching how and what we do in curriculum, teaching, and assessment and a means to reconceptualize what it means now to create active and inclusive learning spaces for today’s college students. We assert that only professors are uniquely qualified to orchestrate these playful experiences.

The chapters which follow share research (empirical studies, case descriptions, self-study, narrative accounts, and more) as well as reflective practice explorations representing a wide range of higher education contexts—from community colleges to public undergraduate institutions to private universities. The disciplinary contexts vary too, with everything from undergraduate Spanish to master’s programs in nursing. As you will find in Chap. 1, we see a continuum as well across the playful universe that is inclusive of those first dipping their toes into a more creative, playful way to engage students to fully embodied experiences that turn the traditional college classroom inside-out.

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# Chapter 1

## An Orientation and Continuum for Playful Pedagogy in Higher Education



Lindsay Portnoy and Laura Baecher

**Abstract** This chapter provides an orientation to and foundation for implementing playful pedagogy in higher education. It explores the attributes of play in adult learning, drawing connections to cognitive science, and examines the concept of the magic circle as a community-building space within higher education classrooms. The chapter also presents continua for understanding playful pedagogy in higher education. These continua capture the qualities that make a pedagogical approach “playful” in higher education, which can illuminate the process for faculty when designing tasks and courses.

### Introduction

Although echoes of convention continue to ring, a refreshing new music of transformation is being heard in the hallways and ivory towers of higher education. The traditional college classroom, with its focus on lectures and textbooks, is losing its allure. Students hunger for more engaged and empowered learning. They are captivated by learning experiences, which ignite their curiosity and set their mind ablaze, playfully interacting with knowledge in new and interesting ways. And it is in this context that playful pedagogy emerges like an enchanting muse, inviting playful professors to revolutionize the status quo of higher education for the next generation.

There is an academic passion underlying playful higher education - a feeling that teaching, learning, research, projects, studying and other academic practices should not feel cumbersome, stressful, disengaging, unrewarding or like something you just have to manage and

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survive. Rather, higher education should make us come alive, feel human, be curious and act with authenticity while also feeling safe, cared for and valued. (Nørgård et al., 2022, p. 9)

Creating this sense of genuine excitement for learning is not, thankfully, beyond our reach or so mysterious after all; it is in the power of professors in their pedagogical decision-making at the level of activity design, class session planning, and syllabus development. We believe in all forms of play and are inclusive in our use of the term, embracing physical movement, visual arts, music, theater, games, game-based learning, and all analog and digital forms of creative approaches that professors are experimenting with. In this chapter, our aim is to demystify the rationale for and process of infusing playful pedagogy into the college and university classroom. We provide an orientation and framework for implementing playful pedagogy in higher education by exploring the attributes of play in adult learning, drawing connections to cognitive science, and present the concept of the magic circle as a community-building space within higher education classrooms. This chapter also presents continua for understanding playful pedagogy in higher education. These continua capture the qualities that make a pedagogical approach “playful” in higher education, which can illuminate the process of designing tasks and courses for faculty.

## Cognitive Science, Adult Learning Theory, and Play

Cognitive science, a discipline rooted in centuries of research on the human mind and its information processing (sometimes referred to more recently as the “learning sciences”), provides a valuable lens through which to comprehend the transformative potential of play, especially for adult learners (Guitard et al., 2005; Tekinbas & Zimmerman, 2003). In particular, six principles of adult learning (Knowles, 1980) closely align with the experiences offered in playful pedagogy (andragogy) (Gee, 2012; Hamari et al., 2016). Play offers:

1. *Low-stakes opportunities for decision-making and problem-solving.* Playful activities activate various regions of the brain, including the hippocampus involved in memory and spatial navigation, as well as the prefrontal cortex responsible for decision-making, planning, and problem-solving (Chu & Schulz, 2020). The low-stakes nature of play provides opportunities for adults to practice social and emotional regulation, as well as stress management, contributing to overall well-being and mental health (Yue et al., 2016).
2. *Embodied experiences.* The integration of internal cognitive processes with external stimuli, such as visual or symbolic immersion within a playful activity, results in the embodiment of cognition and facilitates profound engagement (Fugate et al., 2019; Kontra et al., 2012; Sandoval & Mino, 2013; Shapiro & Stolz, 2019). By synthesizing mental processes with the interactive elements inherent in playful experiences, individuals achieve an elevated level of cognitive involvement and immersion. This synergistic interplay between internal and

external factors contributes to a more comprehensive and enriched learning experience, thereby fostering deeper and more meaningful engagement with the subject matter.

3. *A chance to self-direct learning.* Self-directed learning plays a pivotal role in the educational journey of adult learners, empowering them to assume control over their own learning processes and promoting active engagement (Proyer, 2011). This approach not only facilitates greater ownership and agency but also contributes to the enhancement of information retention and recall through the utilization of creative, imaginative, and innovative problem-solving strategies (Sinfield et al., 2019; Steinkuehler et al., 2012). By taking an active role in their learning, adult learners are able to cultivate a deeper understanding of the subject matter and foster a more enduring grasp of the knowledge acquired.
4. *Intrinsic motivation by inciting curiosity and experimentation.* Playful pedagogy stimulates intrinsic motivation, nurtures curiosity, and encourages experimentation, driving discovery and exploration (Loewenstein, 1994; Guitard et al., 2005; Chu & Schulz, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2000). It also promotes flexibility, adaptability, and resilience in adult learners (Proyer & Jehle, 2013). Research increasingly supports the effectiveness of playful pedagogy in enhancing learning and engagement among adults (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2017), highlighting its value as a facilitator of learning experiences.
5. *Immediate feedback loops.* Just-in-time feedback loops, integral to playful pedagogy, mirror formative feedback principles and promote effective learning (Butler & Winne, 1995; Panadero & Lipnevich, 2022; Zimmerman, 2008; Sitzmann, 2011; Wouters et al., 2013). Instructors in higher education classrooms play vital roles as facilitators and motivators, fostering engagement, collaboration, and the construction of new knowledge through active engagement, continuous guidance, and timely feedback (Bellotti et al., 2013; Warren et al., 2016; Forbes, 2021).
6. *The opportunity to see things in new ways.* Playful pedagogy in higher education fosters creativity, imagination, and the exploration of novel perspectives among adult learners (Guitard et al., 2005; Steinkuehler et al., 2012). It encourages learners to transcend conventional boundaries, promoting the development of social capital through collaboration and the adoption of unique perspectives (Harris & Daley, 2008). In contrast, traditional instructional methods relying on lectures and rote memorization lead to disengagement and decreased motivation (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2017). Playful pedagogy, however, promotes active engagement, generates interest, and cultivates the skill of adopting new perspectives (Harris & Daley, 2008; Jakovljevic, 2019; King, 2018; Proyer, 2011; Proyer & Jehle, 2013). Embracing playful pedagogy enables adult learners to broaden their perspectives, enhance their creativity, and experience transformative learning that expands their understanding of the world.

By embracing the principles of cognitive science and incorporating play into adult learning, educators tap into the innate capacities of the human mind, promoting lifelong learning and personal growth.

## Considering the Magic Circle in the Design of Playful Pedagogy in Higher Education

The notion of the “magic circle,” as Ludens (1955) described in his influential work “Homo Ludens,” encapsulates a unique space that emerges through play. This space, distinct from the everyday world, suspends the usual rules and expectations and introduces a new set of rules and expectations. During childhood, we encounter the magic circle through activities like constructing blanket forts or traversing imaginary lava on the floor. These experiences require us to construct a type of boundary that demarcates the experience of those within the circle from those outside of it, which simultaneously creates bonds of understanding among those within the circle.

The magic circle functions as a safe haven for playful exploration—and it is an essential element that unleashes the potential of playful pedagogy in higher education. Creating a magic circle within our courses transforms learning spaces into environments where knowledge is shared, debated, and co-constructed, forming a unique and bounded world within the greater university landscape (Nørgård et al., 2022). Utilizing the magic circle not only fosters a more supportive learning environment but also cultivates a shared understanding and sense of purpose among students, extending to their abilities and inclinations to engage and collaborate with one another.

### A Continuum of Playful Pedagogy in Higher Education

As we design playful learning activities, our magic circle is created; and as we build community and create together, the magic circle is established. Within this magic circle, playful learning can take on a very wide range of forms. Playful approaches include games, role-playing, simulation, storytelling, art, drama, and so much more. Research on designing playful pedagogy for children emphasizes the importance of choice, delight, and wonder in play, contributing to ownership, enjoyment, excitement, curiosity, and novelty in the learning process (Baker & Ryan, 2021; Mardell et al., 2016). Indeed, the role of play in children’s academic, social, and personal growth is extensively documented. Frameworks exist to guide P-12 teachers in integrating play into instructional settings, with continuums ranging from child-directed to teacher-directed approaches (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). These frameworks serve as heuristics that help educators make intentional choices about the type of playful activities to incorporate into instruction.

As playful pedagogy moves into the higher education context, such frameworks and continua can support professors in recognizing the type of playful teaching they are already engaging in as well as offering a perspective on where the play could be expanded. To that end, we have developed the continuum in Fig. 1.1, drawing upon research on childhood play and inductively coding a wide range of playful practices we have observed in higher education.



**Fig. 1.1** A continuum of 15 elements in higher education playful activity design

Some examples of playful practices aligned to the continuum in Fig. 1.1 are presented in Table 1.1.

As professors design playful experiences for their students, the above criteria can serve as an orientation checklist to see where existing activities could be expanded, just by altering them on one or two dimensions. For instance, the “stump the class” game could be done in person rather than online, and clues could be mimed rather than presented as text. The “found word” poems could be created by groups instead of individuals, and images of words could be captured in photos taken in the community. In other words, these criteria offer an array of variations on the themes