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## **Voices of Playful Learning: Experimental, Affective and Relational Perspectives across Social Education and Teacher Education**

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of the article is to expand the knowledge on playful learning in higher education through a Design-Based Research study across Danish social education and teacher education. It aims to develop a conceptual framework for playful learning in boundary-crossing collaboration in higher education, with the study's empirical analysis examining three distinct voices of playful learning of *experimentation* (e.g., explorative, open-ended, creative collaboration), *affectivity* (e.g., emotional, sensory, and atmospheric collaboration), and *relations* (e.g., cultural, democratic, and polyphonic collaboration). These voices are polyphonic, though they are all expressed as social, active, and experiential ways of knowing and learning situated in playful framings outside 'ordinary' teaching and learning. Finally, the article discusses tensions in developing playful learning in boundary-crossing collaboration between paradoxical longings for both conceptual unity and polyphony, amid control and openness, which influences both practical applications and theoretical implications of developing playful learning in adult higher education.

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### **Introduction**

What does playful learning sound like across professional and educational boundaries in higher education - and how do the voices of playful learning differ and agree? Playful learning as a pedagogical and educational field is increasingly becoming an area of interest in higher education institutions. This is currently illustrated through a growing body of research published accentuating its pedagogical and educational implications, applications, potentials and challenges through multiple special issues (e.g., Moseley & Nørgård, 2021; Nørgård & Moseley, 2021;), several books on the matter (e.g., Gudiksen & Skovbjerg, 2020; James & Nerantzi, 2019; Whitton & Moseley, 2019) along with a substantial number of research articles (e.g., Jensen et al., 2021; Koeners & Francis, 2020; Nørgård et al. 2017; Whitton, 2018). They share underlying values of current higher

education practice with critical stances towards the metric-driven, performance-based, and instrumental educational structures (Koeners & Francis, 2020; Nørgård et al. 2017) - and that the traditional approaches towards studying, teaching, and researching in higher education need novel, joyful, intrinsically motivated, and playful ways of doing and being (Nørgård & Moseley, 2021). Playful learning as a field in research and practice thus pushes the boundaries of traditional education and for rethinking higher education pedagogy. However, recent research accentuates a lack of in-depth theoretical, philosophical, and conceptual knowledge on playful learning and its pedagogical implications and applications in higher education (e.g., Koeners & Francis, 2020; Nørgård & Moseley, 2021; Whitton, 2018). Accordingly, this article examines voices of playful learning across Danish teacher education and social education (early childhood teacher training) in interprofessional and cross-institutional collaboration. It draws from dialogic thinking and theory in distinguishing between voices and utterances, with voices described as themes, perspectives, ideologies, and discourses, and utterances as the concrete acts of speech (Bakhtin, 1981; Olesen et al., 2018). The emphasis on dialogic voices aims to explore playful learning across boundaries in higher education as polyphonic and dynamic concepts building on the notion that understandings of play and playfulness gain value from being examined across disciplinary, professional, and educational boundaries (Masek & Stenros, 2021; Proyer et al., 2017; Sutton-Smith, 1997; van der Aalsvoort & Broadhead, 2016). Furthermore, the concepts of 'boundaries' and 'boundary-crossing' are employed throughout the article providing a need for conceptual clarification. In this article, boundary-crossing is approached as actions and interactions across communities and domains, i.e., boundaries (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). The concepts are used in emphasising that multiple boundaries such as disciplinary, professional, and educational are crossed in collaboration across social education and teacher education. The purpose of the article is thus to expand the body of knowledge on play and playfulness in higher education through the diversity of different professional and educational perspectives. It emphasises voices and characteristics of playful learning in higher education - and how it is articulated in broad perspectives, concrete conceptualisations and how social and material interventions inspire playful learning in higher education.

The present article draws from an empirical, qualitative, and interventionist study within social education and teacher education at a large university college in Denmark. It analyses voices of playful learning as *experimental*, *affective*, and *relational* perspectives, that share several characteristics of boundary-crossing playful learning such as playful framings, social, experiential, and active learning, and paradoxes or tensions within playfulness and education. The article first introduces voices heard in playful learning in higher education along with playful learning across boundaries providing a contextual framing of the research field and a foundation for the current empirical study. Thus, theories of playful learning are integrated later in the article than they usually would in an argumentative structure with the purpose of making sense of those voices after they have been heard. Second, the research design is explained with emphasis on its methodological outline with Design-Based Research along with inspirations from experimental ethnographies. It further describes how the

qualitative inquiry and empirical-analytical process is guided by dialogic thinking and communication theory. Third, the analysis frames the empirical findings in three distinct voices of playful learning that are expanded upon by their respective characteristics and affordances, their connections to theories of play and playfulness, and how the voices are both interconnected and polyphonic. Fourth, the voices of playful learning are discussed as thematically related and diverse, and as paradoxical and tensional in playful higher education.

## **Playful Learning in Higher Education**

Playful learning is often conceptualised in opposition with contemporary tradition and culture in higher education pedagogy. It accentuates active engagement, intrinsic motivation, unpredictable learning, and social, sensory, and explorative ways of knowing and being (Koeners & Francis, 2020; Whitton, 2018). It looks and feels different from 'ordinary' teaching and learning in higher education. Though there is an increased interest in the field of playful learning in higher education, it has been discussed that there is a lack of deep theoretical, pedagogical, and philosophical knowledge for meaningful translation and application in the development and practice of higher education teaching and learning (Nørgård & Moseley, 2021; Whitton, 2018). Furthermore, playful learning and teaching with adults in higher education appear stigmatised and are challenged by presumptions and cultures in current academic and pedagogical practice within higher education (James, 2019; Whitton, 2018). In the following paragraphs, background and conceptual overviews of playful learning and playful boundary-crossings in higher education are presented to frame the research field and provide a contextual platform for the empirical study throughout the article.

Nørgård and Moseley describe the relationship between playfulness and academia as valuable in a multitude of forms and expressions across students, teachers, and researchers. They articulate that playful *curiosity*, *creativity*, and *communality* become viable if encouraged and acknowledged in educational institutions and societal contexts with playful teaching and learning in higher education as a relational engagement with playful interplaying with perspectives, activities, and ideas (Nørgård & Moseley, 2021).

*Academia and academics become playful, when thoughts, words, actions and voices intermingle and become entangled in each other and the world – and we let others and the world play with and through us (...) higher education institutions can function as exploratorium, experimentarium and collaboratorium for playful academic practice and a sacred, shared and safe space. (Nørgård & Moseley, 2021: 2).*

Accordingly, playful higher education accentuates opening up to each other and the world, experimenting curiously and creatively together, and exploring new ways of being and knowing in playful and joyful subversions of the traditional learning spaces. These subversions - or framings of playful learning spaces - are often conceptualised as 'magic circles', a term originally attributed to play historian Johan Huizinga (1949) as a space for play (Whitton, 2018). A 'magic circle' is constructed as a temporary world during play separate from

the ordinary world by the participant's creation of soft or fuzzy boundaries either materially or ideally, that promotes trustful and novel ways of experiencing and learning together. This, however, is contested in education and learning with the conditions and structures of education always being part of playful learning ((Huizinga, 1949: 10; Nørgård et al., 2017; Whitton, 2018). Adult playful learning is commonly described as novel, ludic, and active spaces and approaches for teaching and learning that encompass whimsy, open-ended and explorative pedagogies (Koeners & Francis, 2020; Nørgård et al., 2017; Whitton, 2018). Playful interactions are expressed as encouraging immersion, joy, fun and laughter - and thus emotional and affective responses in social and active learning - through a sense of playfulness and developing safe and playful spaces (Jensen et al., 2021; Koeners & Francis, 2020). In other studies, playfulness is found to be connected to intrinsic motivation, creativity and enabling safe learning environments where students feel free to participate and take risks (King, 2018; Majgaard, 2010). Play scholar Allison James describes how playful learning in higher education can be understood as either different forms of play approached in exploring subjects and activities, or attitudes towards learning through playfulness. Both, however, are challenged as higher education pedagogies through paradoxes of the anti-structural characteristics of play and playfulness (e.g., open-ended, processual, and free) and the structural elements of education (e.g., purpose, goals, and outcomes) (James, 2019). It resonates with several research studies discussing legitimacy and credibility in playful learning in higher education - and that play in adulthood is stigmatised and lacks understanding (Whitton, 2018; Nørgård et al., 2017).

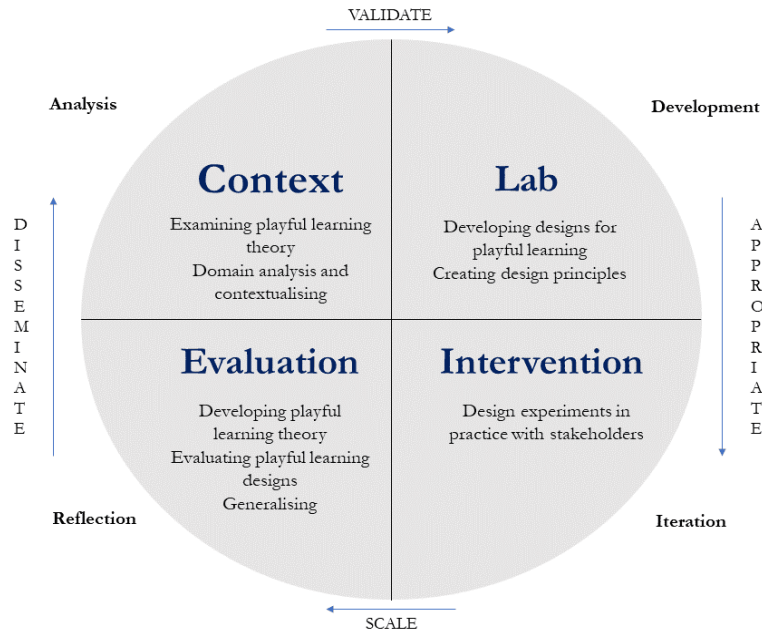
In recent years, there has been a growing number of research articles on playful learning across disciplinary, professional, and educational boundaries in higher education. They emphasise the potential and challenges in playful learning as approaches to boundary-crossing collaboration through novel, engaging, creative, active, and social ways of learning in higher education, that permeates boundaries, but is challenged and opposed by structural, disciplinary, and professional tensions (Arnab et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2018; Pánek et al., 2018; Majgaard, 2010). For boundary-crossing purposes, numerous research articles point to the potential of engaging with each other and with relations across boundaries through distinct types of play such as role-play and imaginative play, and its potential for scaffolding open-ended, explorative, and creative learning situated in trustful play spaces that not only allow for but also encourage collaborative experimentation and failure (e.g. Addo & Castle, 2015; Arnab et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2018; Neuderth et al., 2018). Playful boundary-crossing is further articulated as a potential catalyst for creativity and co-creativity through the participants' diversity and exchanges of perspectives (Bogers & Sproedt, 2012; Nerantzi, 2019), and how playful pedagogies as enjoyable and affective experiences in play spaces promote open-ended exploration and creative learning (Bogers & Sproedt, 2012; Choi et al., 2018; Pánek et al., 2018). In playful boundary-crossing collaboration, frequent results are discussed in the potential capabilities of playfulness in fostering trustful, intrinsically motivated, and joyful learning experiences through the diversity of perspectives (Arnab et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2018; Nerantzi, 2019; Sweeney et al., 2015). Playful learning across educations, disciplines and professions is however also displayed as challenged in upholding motivation and collaboration, balancing different roles and cultures, attending to

structural and scaffolding *for* structural differences, asymmetrical participation, and inequalities across boundaries (Addo & Castle, 2015; Arnab et al., 2019; Majgaard, 2010; Villadsen et al., 2012).

Throughout the literature, playful learning across boundaries in higher education is conceptualised very differently with some research emphasising play and play-based approaches to learning while other studies address it through playfulness as an attitude or mood in engaging with educational practice. It resonates with the ambiguity of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997) and the need for in-depth theoretical knowledge on playful learning (Nørgård & Moseley, 2021; Whitton, 2018). There is thus an appeal for examining how playful learning is conceptualised and framed in higher education - and how different voices of playful learning sound in higher education pedagogy.

## Research Design & Methods

The present study is methodologically guided by Design-Based Research (DBR) which is a flexible and theory-driven approach undertaking research with the educational practitioners that involve collaborative developments, experimentations, and evaluations of design experiments (Barab & Squire, 2004; Brown, 1992; Wang & Hannafin, 2005). It is frequently conceptualised as a pragmatic, grounded, integrative and iterative methodology with the researcher being a close part of the authentic and often messy real-life contexts and educational challenges (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Wang & Hannafin, 2005). The present study is part of a larger ongoing research project on playful learning and collaboration in boundary-crossing higher education that examines collaboration across disciplinary, professional, and educational boundaries situated in Danish teacher education and social education. The research design is framed as analytical, developmental, iterative, and reflective phases of co-creation (Christensen et al., 2012; Goff & Getenet, 2017) as visualised in figure 1. The *analytical* phase addresses the educational context by examining theories and practices related to play, playfulness and learning within the domains of teacher education and social education. This influences the *developmental* phase of co-creating playful learning designs for interprofessional and cross-institutional contexts through diverse theoretical and practical perspectives on playful learning. The *interventionist* and iterative phases are aimed at experimenting with playful learning designs and examining students' and teachers' experiences of playful learning and collaboration in higher education learning. Finally, the reflective phases framed the educators' and the researchers' collaborative *evaluations* of interventions that were supplemented by individual interviews.



The close collaboration between research and practice promotes novel perspectives on educational research going beyond traditional methods of observation whereas the study is inspired by two modes of ethnography: *Experimental collaboration* (Estalella & Criado, 2018) and *short-term ethnography* (Pink & Morgan, 2013). In experimental collaboration, the relationship between researcher and participants is configured as the development of *epistemic partnerships* that accentuates a shared approach to ‘joint problem-making’ in exploring and problematising the world around us. It is examined through ‘fieldwork devices’ understood as a variety of available digital tools that are used in a collaborative ‘devising’ of the field (Estalella & Criado, 2018: 10-12). Short-term ethnography reflects on e.g. design research and interventions as “intensive excursions into their [practitioners] lives, which use more interventional as well as observational methods ...” however ... “it is useful to go beyond observation to create short-term research engagements ... supported by the ubiquity of digital media in both the everyday environments we research and in our research practices” (Pink & Morgan, 2013: 352-353). Consequently, both approaches are utilised in the design workshops and field experiments where the researcher participated, and they both diverge from more traditional observational methods in accentuating the interventionist, collaborative, and digital tools for ‘devising the empirical field’.

The research design and empirical analyses are guided by dialogic thinking and communication theory drawing on Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin with all language acts understood as polyphonic and thus embedded with diverse voices influencing speech and communication (Bakhtin, 1981; Olesen et al., 2018). The polyphony in communication is conceptualised as dialogic tensions through the *centripetal* and *centrifugal* forces, where one tries to centre language and meaning in common and shared perspectives with the other pulling away from the centre towards diverse and individual perspectives. An equilibrium can be sought as a balance or tension between those forces (Hong et al., 2015). This approach guides the qualitative inquiries in searching for conceptual tensions in the voices of playful learning.

The data analysed in this article consists of dialogical qualitative interviews (n=16) and design workshops (n=12) on co-creating playful learning designs with educators from social education and teacher education. The interviews with individual educators and co-creational design workshops with groups of educators are both approached as dialogic inquiries and encounters in the *opening, widening and deepening* of perspectives on playful learning (Wegerif, 2007), the dialogic interview addressing polyphonies of voices (Tanggaard, 2009), with the analysis guided by inquiries into how different voices and perspectives produce knowledge, when and how the voices are present, and how tensions between voices influence collaboration and co-creation (Olesen et al., 2018: 31-32). During the playful experiments, the students were asked to write short participant reflections (n=158) on experiences of playful boundary-crossings as introspective and dialogic ways of knowing (Dysthe, 2005) through reflection-on-action (Schön, 2001).

The analysis is guided by Thematic Analysis (TA) in developing patterns from different data sources through processes of coding the data, developing themes, and approaching it through both deductive and inductive phases (Brandt & Sprogøe, 2019). It utilises the recursive phases described in reflexive TA of familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing and developing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The processes of coding the data and developing themes were intended to be both descriptive (semantic) and interpretive (latent) - which can be framed as an abductive analytical strategy - by representing conceptualisations and perspectives from the data along with emphasising the researchers' knowledge as a resource for identifying less explicit patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2019: 592; Brandt & Sprogøe, 2019: 93-94). The role of the researcher is central to reflexive TA emphasising the researchers' reflexivity and subjectivity in both data analysis and production of relevance to the interventionist and collaborative ways of inquiry in DBR studies.

### **Voices of Playful Learning across Social Education and Teacher Education**

In developing themes through analysing and comparing the data sources, three voices were constructed that illustrate thematic patterns of boundary-crossing playful learning in adult higher education. It is voiced as *experimental, affective, and relational* perspectives. Each theme has several sub-themes that characterise and elaborate on the specific voice of playful learning. The voices are polyphonic in encompassing numerous characteristics, different perspectives, and discourses, and being influenced by diverse pedagogical and educational understandings. They are related, but sound different - sometimes they overlap and other times they diverge clearly. They are perspectives on playful learning in boundary-crossing higher education and situated and contextually grounded in practices of playful collaboration between social education and teacher education. The multi-vocal complexity and diversity are both experienced as possibilities and fundamental challenges for understanding and developing playful higher education pedagogy. The analysis is structured in four sections with the first three examining the voices, and their characteristics illustrated through

exemplifying quotes from the data sources, and the last section comparing the voices and their shared and diverse elements, extending the analysis into perspectives on understanding playful learning in adult higher education through dialogic tensions and framing play spaces.

### *Playful Voice 1: Experimental Perspectives on Playful Learning*

The experimental voice centres on social and material experimentations with knowledge, learning and boundaries in collaboration. It approaches playful learning as open-ended processes of uncertainty, instability, unpredictability and the emergence of playful activities and processes. It is characterised by openness towards each other, learning, collaborative processes, and failure. Experimental playful learning is vocalised as active and creative oriented towards constructing and materialising things together, which is described as ‘laboratory-thinking’ with testing and trying things out. It is typically inspired by activities of object play, object-mediated communication, social play, and construction play.

In the interviews with educators from both social education and teacher education, experimental dimensions of playful learning are articulated as explorative, creative, and open-ended activities that accentuates the processual dimensions of playful learning.

*Teacher Educator: When talking about playful learning .... It is about conceptualising it in some way or the other, these very broad concepts of play, or the playful approaches, which also has the same broad understandings, but appears to be divided into the experimental, the explorative, the creative (...) but I also think that the whole discussion on the free play was dropped at some point.*

*Social Educator: These playful spaces or playful approaches should be experimental. There is not a product that is more right than the other, it is important that they learn that the result is not set in stone. I remember articulating it sometimes when we talked of developing a workshop with the student’s experimenting and I think it resonated with some.*

It is generally framed as spaces and environments in teaching and learning outside the ordinary educational settings with opportunities for leading yourself and others into unknown processes shaped by openness towards failure. It resonates with research into playful learning in higher education emphasising magic circles and safe spaces (Whitton, 2018) and understanding playful higher education as *experimentariums*, *exploratoriums* and *collaboratoriums* with joint engagement in playful curiosity and creativity through lusory attitudes and ludic interactions (Nørgård, 2021). It draws upon theories of play from Johan Huizinga and Gregory Bateson. For Huizinga, play is culturally situated in spaces outside the ordinary daily life – the ‘magic circle’ – that enables play to take place (Huizinga, 1949; Whitton, 2018). It resembles Bateson’s perspective on play as communication, where participants in play continually communicate and meta-communicate a playful framing



by asking if the current activity we engage in is play (Bateson, 1972). These subversions of ordinary learning spaces are experienced as potentials for safe, playful, and open-ended learning, though they constantly reference the external real world of education and its intents and goals. Playful learning as an experimental pedagogy is furthermore connected to novel pedagogies and movements away from traditional styles of teaching and learning in higher education with a sensitivity towards having the courage - individually and collectively - to enter new domains, situations, and challenges.

*Social Educator: It is about playing games or challenging them in new ways, so they are not only met by the terrors of blackboards and slideshows. They must either produce something, illustrate something without using words, or play out scenarios. You can twist it by experimenting, playing, and using your bodies - and then it is also quite fun. (...) It is when I dare to play and dare to go into unknown territories with uncertain endings - because you do not truly know where things might end when it involves other people - it also enables them to say to me that something is hard, unobtainable or the like.*

*Teacher Educator: It is best if it is slightly experimenting, a bit playful, and just beyond the ordinary boundaries, in deep water - but at the same time, it must go into a very tight structure, that must contain something and generate some kind of feeling of the outcome, at least a learning outcome. In that sense, it is both experimentation with methods, interprofessional collaboration and playfulness.*

The voices of experimentation are moreover guided by perspectives on having the courage to play - both as educators and students - and opening up towards uncontrollability in the otherwise controlled contexts of higher education. It is accentuated as a novel approach to experiment creatively across educational boundaries with an emphasis on how participants' diversity and difference in perspectives promotes creativity and co-creativity (Bogers & Sproedt, 2012; Nerantzi, 2019).

Experimental playful learning is similarly articulated as experimenting with boundaries and learning settings and is thus displayed as *appropriative* and *disruptive* (Sicart, 2014). It has the capacity to permeate the situations where it is employed but it also becomes the primary centre of attention in learning activities which influence experiences, ways of teaching, and collaboration when it situationally overshadows educational purposes. The experimental voice further accentuates a stance towards traditional ways of teaching focusing on challenging and engaging students in new ways, letting them become active through collaborative play activities with objects and construction play. These approaches relate to object-mediated communication in boundary-crossing collaboration where the participants engage and communicate with each other through the co-creation of playful constructions that allows for new strategies towards dialogic encounters, coping with the unknown and uncertain, and enabling collaborative agency (Roos, 2006).

## *Playful Voice 2: Affective Perspectives on Playful Learning*

Affectivity in playful learning across boundaries is related to sensory, emotional, and experiential learning and collaboration, regularly described by the potentials of inducing and promoting wonder, imagination, empathy, and playful atmospheres. It is characterised by conceptualisations of playful learning as engaging and joyful processes through lusory attitudes, sense of novelty and agency, moods and atmospheres of playfulness, and perspectives on imagination and empathy in higher education pedagogy. It is commonly inspired by versions of pretend play and imagination play - but frequently enabled by simple playful and imaginative interactions and approaching boundary-crossing learning in perceived play spaces or 'magic circles'.

*Social Educator: Some of the things embedded in playfulness, which we have engaged with, is imagination. Is it possible to allow imagination into the learning spaces? We have worked with sensory approaches (...) and we have been playing with imaginative journeys among other things, and the moods that are reachable in educational settings. (...) construction play is always wonderful when you are engaged with tinkering in some way or the other. And the educational setting is still in control. The more uncontrollable playfulness is more difficult, right?*

*Teacher Educator: They mentioned something about how it involved getting active, moving around, and using your senses in other ways than sitting and listening. That is playful learning in my perspective, I think. (...) I think a lot about how it must not become some simple 'playing around with movements' - activities or brain breaks - for me that is not playful learning. It has to be deeply integrated; we do this with a purpose and a learning intent that can be realised by it.*

Within the affective dimensions of playful learning the students' active involvement using their bodies, senses, experiences, and emotions are framed as ways of meeting across boundaries, and learning collectively, but also related to individual experiences of playful learning. For some of the educators, this is approached through imaginative and pretend-based approaches to learning with conceptions about future practices of social educators and teachers, thus playing with anticipations and imaginations of social educator and teacher practice, and generally situating playful learning as a hopeful pedagogy. It is further voiced as key aspects of playful pedagogies to promote active learning without merely reducing it to simplistic play types or classroom energisers. Playful learning is described as sensory learning approaches – collectively and individually – that allow for new ways of knowing and reflecting in higher education learning and pedagogy.

*Social Educator: When our students sit and model something, or draw something, they use their whole bodies. There is a tendency to understand bodies in activities where I have to sweat and use all of the body, but it is also bodily to sit and perceive something, to draw it, or to stand and mix colours and experience them smeared across a canvas. So, the whole body as a sensory organ that enables perceptions, registering them and reflecting on them, discussing them and pushing them back into the world is a way of learning.*

Affective playful learning is thus a focus on engaging across boundaries with each other through emotions, senses, and playful atmospheres that promote collaboration through active, imaginative, and reflective ways of learning. This is enabled through e.g., imaginative journeys and bodily activities - as formerly described by a participating educator - that approaches emotions and moods in higher education pedagogy and learning as integral ways of engaging across boundaries. However, it is generally articulated that playful learning must not only be reduced to simple energisers and fun breaks; that working and collaborating with the affective dimensions of playful learning must focus on the deep, profound, and intrinsic parts of pedagogy.

### ***Playful Voice 3: Relational Perspectives on Playful Learning***

Playful learning across boundaries as relational might be regarded as a redundant voice, for is not all collaboration in some way relational? Still, it is articulated and developed throughout the data sources as a distinct theme that approaches playful learning as new spaces for boundary-crossing participation and action through democratic engagement, heterogeneous and diverse perspectives, co-creation of knowledge, and reflections on the potentially permeable and disruptive qualities of playfulness in collaboration across educations and professions. These approaches to boundary-crossing learning are frequently inspired by play activities such as role-playing, communicative play and object-based play, but in relation to the two other voices of experimentation and affectivity, this voice is directed towards establishing and sustaining interpersonal relations and relational pedagogies.

*Social Educator: I would say that the values of democracy are about people's opportunities to participate, and when they join in, the way we participate is characterised by concepts of openness and openness towards failure. I mean, that one actually goes into it with the mindset that says: I am in. I say yes. I say yes to play - or I say yes to participate and everything you might bring with you. Or I contribute with it myself, and then we can be curious about if it brings us anywhere new (...) and that is foundational I guess because we need people that can envision alternative scenarios for the future than what we see right now.*

*Teacher Educator: They are participating, and the goal of this course is that the students come out of it engaged, curious, and with a new consciousness of mutual problems. It is about experiencing boundary-crossing collaboration through playful approaches - and developing meaningful questions and new desires to learn more. It has to be clearly communicated, so the students will dare to engage.*

Relational approaches in playful learning are articulated as deeply diverse collaboration accentuating the interpersonal connections, play spaces, and developing openness towards failure in boundary-crossing collaboration. It is framed across empirical inquiries as democratic engagement where participants invest themselves in saying "yes" to the process, the other, and the playful collaborations. The democratic dimension is displayed as the integrations of perspectives and values enabled by playful attitudes to collaboration and

learning with and through each other. Differences in perspectives become opportunities for curiosity and learning of mutual problems, with playfulness promoting newfound desires to learn from each other's disciplines and professions. It relates to numerous research studies accentuating the collaborative qualities of playful learning in developing new partnerships, enabling trustful collaboration, and promoting co-creation, co-creativity, and new ways of knowing through the mutual differences and diversity of perspectives (e.g., Arnab et al., 2019; Majgaard, 2010; Pánek et al., 2018). In boundary-crossing playful learning, this is highlighted as important potentials for higher education pedagogy for sustaining generative collaboration through playfulness promoting ideas, solutions, and learning processes beyond the capabilities of individuals accentuating pedagogical hopes of envisioning better education and practices.

Playful collaboration across boundaries is particularly enabled through play types that engage with social and material constructions such as role-play, object-play, and communicative play in scaffolding and encouraging collaboration in open-ended and exploratory relational learning (Arnab et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2018; Neuderth et al., 2018). These approaches share perspectives on the participants being offered new strategies for communication and relating through the co-construction and co-design of materials and objects. Besides specific pedagogical approaches to play types, it is discussed in the design workshops and interviews as playful attitudes that are not necessarily play activities, but the open-minded and explorative approaches to collaboration characterised as playfulness towards collaborative learning processes while also being intense, interpersonal ways of relating. It relates to playful learning in higher education as *communality* and thinking of higher education as a *collaboratorium* emphasising relational care, curiosity, creativity, and interplaying with roles and boundaries (Nørgård, 2021).

*The university as collaboratorium grows out of playful communality, where people have care and concern for each other, a drive towards being playful together, treat each other as equals, engage in joint playful curiosity and creativity, appreciate diversity, heterogeneity and alterity – and through this construct empathic co-operative communities or play cultures (Nørgård, 2021: 151).*

Thus, engaging each other playfully allows for novel collaborative and joyful explorations of different perspectives, ideas, and values that promote the relational potentials of playful learning. With playful learning as a relational voice in higher education pedagogy, the emphasis is on the accentuation of democratic engagement, interpersonal and generative collaboration, and meeting each other across boundaries in non-usual ways.

### ***Playful Framings and Dialogic Tensions***

In the empirical inquiries, playful learning across boundaries is generally framed as shifts between playful and ordinary learning spaces with anticipation of enabling novel, active and safe learning environments. They

share an emphasis on playful learning allowing students to enter safe and trust-based playful spaces bound by its own rules and conditions which resonates with the notion of the ‘magic circle’ (Nørgård, 2021; Whitton, 2018), and playful learning as continuous communicative ‘framings’ on the differences between play and real-life allowing for more open participation in learning (Bateson, 1972). The subversions of ordinary spaces for teaching and learning are thus integral to all three voices of playful learning.

The voices all accentuate the social, active, joyful, and experiential dimensions of playful learning in higher education. Beyond the shared perspectives, playful learning is differently conceptualised both in and across educations in the same interventionist settings and experimentations. Furthermore, the educators routinely articulate longings for both shared conceptualisations and vocabularies along with individual and diverse perspectives. It implies dialogic tensions where both *centripetal* and *centrifugal* forces are at stake that stresses the polyphonic nature of playful learning. It becomes hearable in the dynamic shifts between emphasising the *aesthetics* and *functionalities* of play - how it is both valued in itself and has educational intent and goals (Skovbjerg, 2016). Playful learning is additionally articulated differently across educations, with teacher education questioning *how teaching becomes playful* with social education more attuned towards asking *how play becomes learning*. A central challenge to developing playful learning across boundaries in higher education thus lies in engaging the polyphony without it becoming a cacophony of different and diverse voices holding each other back. Each playful voice, however, is also bound together by voices of anticipated future practices, hopeful pedagogies, and attitudes towards collaboration and learning. In table 1, the three voices are visualised with their respective characteristics, pedagogical and playful inspirations, and common perspectives.

**Table 1**

<b>Voice</b>	<b>Experimental</b>	<b>Affective</b>	<b>Relational</b>
<b>Characteristics</b>	Open processes; explorative; investigative; trustful; openness to failure; construction; testing; unpredictable; emergent; active; creative; laboratory-thinking	Emotions; moods; joyful; curiosity; attitudes; immersion; a sense of novelty; human/material agency; aesthetic engagement; atmospheres; sensory; wonder; empathy; imagination	Participation; spaces for action and possibilities; difference; perspectives; presence; integration; collaboration; co- creation; democracy; permeable; disruptive

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<b>What inspires playful learning?</b>	Object-play; object-mediated communication; social play; materialities	Pretend play; imagination play; playful interactions; play spaces/settings	Role-play; communicative play; object-play; social-interactive play
<b>Shared perspectives</b>	Playful learning as social, joyful, and active; play spaces; 'magic circle'; playful framings; novel boundary-crossing; plays' permeability; boundary-practices; play/playfulness as anti-structural; paradoxes of playful higher education		

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### **Pedagogical Tensions and Paradoxes of Playful Higher Education**

Within the dialogic tensions of developing playful learning in higher education, between paradoxical longings for both unity and commonality lies numerous paradoxes of playful higher education. For Bakhtin (1981), the relationship between the *centripetal* and *centrifugal* forces is language in a constant flux between unity and polyphony - or in this examination between common and individual understandings of playful learning. Throughout the co-creation in the study, developing playful learning is regularly articulated as anti-structural pedagogies that clashes with the structural intents and goals of higher education.

*Teacher Educator: We encounter some dilemmas where playfulness and learning are contradictory. It must be open-ended and unpredictable, but they must take an exam. It must be open, uncontrollable, and wild, but they are working towards solutions and products. There are logics in tension with each other.*

The educators experience the development of playful learning as continuously tensional and paradoxical with reflections on how play is valued through its aesthetics and functionalities - when it is appreciated as something in itself and has to be good for something. Furthermore, the open-ended, explorative, and experimental perspectives on playful learning are also experienced as contrasting with higher education structures of goals, subject matter, and curriculum. This might be illuminated through different perspectives on educational development in-between structure and openness - or between paradoxical longings for both control and freedom.

<b>Tensions and Paradoxes in developing Playful Higher Education</b>	
The centripetal forces (longings for shared vocabularies in understanding and developing)	The centrifugal forces (longings for individual diversity in understanding and developing)
The aesthetics of play	The functionality of play
The anti-structures of play and playfulness	The structures and intent of education
The appropriative qualities of playful learning	The goals and orderliness of education
The amorphous in pedagogical development	The organised in pedagogical development
The uncontrollable in play and dialogue	The longings for control and certainty

In “Art & Ethics” (1961), Danish philosopher K.E. Løgstrup ponders how a common (mis-)perception is that creative development is strengthened in the amorphous or formless - that it invites creativity, but that innovation and profound development might better happen within order, structure, and form (Bugge & Sørensen, 2020). It relates to perspectives from Thomas Ziehe, who in “Islands of Intensity in a Sea of Routine” (2004) proposes that a condition of modern education is the continuous longings for both shared structures and common understandings - but that people also long for individuality, diversity, and difference. Playful learning is conceptualised as deeply interpersonal and collaborative confrontations and engagements in experimental, affective, and relational perspectives - but in imagining and designing it as playful learning some common and shared conceptualisations and vocabularies are needed among educators in educational development to make it reachable.

These paradoxes of control within collaborating on and developing playful learning across boundaries in higher education invites reflections on how the plasticity of play and playfulness themselves influence it - and how this ambiguity and fluidity shapes the educator’s conceptualisations and developments of playful learning. This notion ties in with Hartmut Rosa who in “The Uncontrollable” (2020) explains, how the uncontrollable events of life are potential spaces for *resonance* (as a search for vibrant and resonant relations where humans stimulate each other) though there are fundamentally strong societal longings for control. He hypothesises that a middle ground - the semi-controllable - is needed where the uncontrollable becomes reachable. For higher education and developing playful learning, the implications of this reside exactly in the paradoxes and finding developmental spaces in between openness and structures accentuated by the plasticity of play and playfulness - and that the integration and exploration of differences reveal potentials of generative

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collaboration that enables novel solutions, understandings, and developments that goes beyond the capabilities of individuals. Consequently, there is a collaborative sense and generative value in maintaining dialogic tensions and thus residing in the equilibrium of commonality and diversity, between control and freedom, in developing playful learning across boundaries as a higher education pedagogy.

The theoretical implications and practical applications of this relates to how the languages and terminologies of playful learning have crucial roles in shaping the applications, accessibility, and acceptability in adult higher education (Whitton, 2018: 9-10). Understanding playful learning as polyphonic and tensional means that the voices are always dynamic and in states of becoming in educational contexts - that playful learning is multi-vocal - with conceptualisation and application in constant flux between shared and individual language, between structure and uncontrollability. There will always be elements of uncertainty and unpredictability in designing for playful learning with the ambiguity and plasticity of play and playfulness, whereas it has been suggested that educators must navigate in the middle spaces and allow for emergence in playful teaching and learning as control of the situations and contexts might limit the potentials of playful learning within adult higher education (Skovbjerg & Jørgensen, 2021: 9). This article thus proposes a conceptual framework for boundary-crossing playful learning in higher education as experimental, affective, and relational voices that are polyphonic, tensional, and paradoxical - and that the spaces and tensions between unity and diversity are potentials for generative collaboration across boundaries and emergence in playful teaching and learning in adult higher education.

## Conclusion

This article expands the current research on conceptual, theoretical, and pedagogical knowledge on playful learning in higher education through an examination across social education and teacher education on the diversity of perspectives, characteristics, influences, and paradoxes within playful learning and higher education. A conceptual framework for voices of playful learning is proposed drawing on both descriptive and interpretive analysis of qualitative data. The analysis examines three voices of playful learning as *experimental*, *affective*, and *relational* perspectives that are generally framed by enabling play spaces as subversions of the ordinary world in teaching and learning, and as active, social, experiential, and joyful learning stimulated by play and playfulness.

The article further describes and discusses how developing playful learning for higher education pedagogy is experienced as a space for dialogic tensions between unity and diversity and as paradoxes between anti-structural conceptions of play and playfulness versus the structural and intent-based dimensions of higher education. These tensions and paradoxes are elaborated upon as paradoxical longings for control and freedom, though they materialise as opportunities for understanding and developing playful learning across boundaries



in between contradictions or tensions, in a semi-controllable space, that potentialises generative collaboration along with emergence in playful teaching and learning in adult higher education.

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