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Building a playful learning community

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KEYWORDS

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Community

ABSTRACT

Using play with adults has many benefits but can be challenging to design. This research sought to understand if being part of a community and seeking advice and support from colleagues could support in the design and use of playful techniques. Participants identified clear benefits for both students and staff from the utilisation of playful approaches, relating to student engagement, community-building, and a more complex engagement with the subject being studied. However, they also identified a range of challenges associated with implementing playful practice, citing negative perceptions of play, issues of inclusivity, and a lack of resourcing. This paper reflects on the value of play across a range of disciplines, which could provide a method of engaging students and overcome some of the challenges higher education institutions are facing. It then outlines a number of recommendations to help support staff overcome the challenges identified in using playful techniques so that the benefits of playfulness can be embedded into teaching practice.

Introduction

The significance of play in relation to child development has long been accepted, but there is a growing recognition that play and games can have a key role in working environments for adults too (Whitton and Moseley, 2019). Play, or games, can encourage creativity and enable greater problem-solving skills as well as prompting teamwork and engagement. This is potentially significant for the mission of universities to deliver high quality teaching that is research informed. Whitton and Nørgård (2025) go so far as to argue that play is vital in universities to enable the fostering of learning communities and creative practice that higher education needs to thrive in a changing world. Engaging in playful practices could help engage students more successfully as well as equipping students more effectively for future employment. Its value was recognised by Rice (2009) who found it could be effective in motivating and improving student engagement.

However, introducing play into formal working environments and post compulsory education is not without challenge. Increased marketisation in HE contexts has placed a particular emphasis on 'profitability, top-down governance, formal structures and procedures, and a customer interface' (Alajoutsijärvi et al 2021, p.33), which are qualities that can feel at odds with the collaborative, spontaneous, and exploratory nature of playful pedagogical approaches. Playful approaches or games are often seen as frivolous, infantile and a distraction from 'real work' (Whitton & Moseley, 2019). As James (2019) observes 'discussion of play within a university setting provokes strong emotions.' Participants may express a skepticism about the value of engaging in more

'creative' pursuits as well as inhibitions or negative past experiences that mean that the value of play is not appreciated either by students or colleagues. Playful practices can also be associated with bringing chaos into an apparently ordered institution, which can be unsettling (Bengsten, 2025). Part of this could be addressed by considering what the definition of 'play' is in the working context.

In its broadest sense 'play' could be defined as thinking differently and using unconventional or different techniques. Huizinga states that play is a fundamental part of existence; enabling freedom from conventions, social connection, freedom to fail and to create (Huizinga, 1949; Rosen, 2019; Whitton & Moseley, 2019). The benefits of introducing such approaches into professional environments are potentially manifold, particularly in relation to problem solving (Kark, 2011) and relate to ideas common in positive psychology about enabling participants to enter a 'flow' state, where nothing else matters except the activity in hand (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Playful approaches, then, could encompass breaks from the 'normal' working or learning environment such as walking, undertaking activities outside or moving to different locations. Introducing play encompasses the opportunity to be creative, approach a problem from a different standpoint, take risks and generally encourages a greater and more satisfying engagement with work and learning. When well-designed, they place learning at the heart of the experience which is critical for successful engagement **(**Hutchinson & Lawrence, 2011).

At City St George's, University of London there are a number of staff engaged in playful practices in relation to their learning and teaching activities. However, often these staff are unconnected to each other. Our institution has a number of key characteristics that make playful learning valuable, but at the same time challenging. In terms of student demographics, we have a high number of commuter students and students who are the first in their family to go to university, so finding ways to engage them in learning is key. However, with the tag line 'the university for business, practice and the professions', there may be a sense that being playful is at odds with the idea of being professional, making some students and teaching staff more skeptical about its value. In this context, play could usurp and challenge a transactional model of education, which enables greater critical thinking and much needed creativity to support preparing our students for those businesses, practices and professions.

One of the challenges of developing and designing playful learning opportunities can be finding and connecting with others to experiment and brainstorm playful learning ideas. Therefore in 2020, the Learning Enhancement and Development (LEaD) team created a playful learning community of practice to provide support for staff engaging in play-based learning and teaching activities. This grew partly from the professional interests of colleagues in this team, who used games and play on the MA in Academic Practice course. Module feedback showed consistently that participants valued playful approaches and were often inspired to try them out in their own teaching. A number of colleagues developed or adapted games for use in their own teaching and they shared their experiences at the playful community.

Research Aims & Methodology

The playful community met online from 2020-22; however, beyond this small group, staff often professed a sense that playful learning approaches were inappropriate for higher education learning. This research aimed to gather evidence to understand why our staff participated in playful practice and what the benefits were to them and their students. The research was undertaken in the summer of 2023 and it aimed to:

- Explore what playful learning means at the institution
- Consider how play has been used to engage students at the institution
- Consider what support and development is useful for staff engaging in playful learning techniques
- Explore the experiences of playful approaches to general university 'business' such as committee meetings and other activities and the notion of 'playful leadership'.

This research was designed to be exploratory in nature and therefore used focus groups with staff who were members of the playful learning community or students studying the MA in Academic Practice. We asked open questions to understand what their needs were and what they understood by the terms 'play', 'playful learning' and 'playful approaches'. We also asked why they used these approaches, what the challenges might be and what support they needed or had received in their playful endeavours.

Focus groups were chosen as opposed to semi-structured interviews, because we recognised that play is a community activity and the discussion in the focus groups would be richer between participants than interviews alone. They also have a long tradition of being used in educational research dating back to the mid 1990s (Gilflores & Alonso, 1995). In the particular context of City St. George's, we felt that discussions between staff who teach on both academic and vocational programmes would provide unique insights into the value of establishing a playful community. We held six online focus groups via Microsoft Teams, speaking with a total of 14 members of staff from across a range of disciplines including Law, Nursing, the Social Sciences, and Educational Development. We analysed the data using thematic analysis, as an approach that enabled us to 'provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of [our] data' (Braun and Clark, 2006). Given the variety of disciplines represented by participants, thematic analysis afforded us the opportunity to examine 'the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights' (King, 2004). To better understand our participants' experiences, we have used direct quotes from the focus groups in this article.

Literature Review

Playful learning has been recognised as valuable in higher education for over 15 years. Rice (2009) cited the growing use of LEGO but also digital gaming in higher education from the late 1990s onwards. His research into the use of playful learning in a School of Architecture found that play engaged and motivated students and that at times it could be transformational for their learning (Rice, 2009). Currently there is a growing community of higher education staff who engage in playful practices, supported by a number of networks, including the Playful Learning Association and the Creative Academic Network (https://www.creativeacademic.uk/). Within the disciplines there are also communities of practice supporting playful approaches to teaching, such as the Economics Network (https://economicsnetwork.ac.uk/themes/games/) and the library community who use games extensively in their teaching (Lotts, 2024). We are also aware that playful learning networks exist at other universities, including Imperial College London, the University of Sussex, the University of Edinburgh, UCLAN and the University of Manchester. Events such as the Playful Learning conference and this journal have been valuable ways of bringing the community together. This community also contributes to research that supports the view that playful learning approaches have numerous benefits.

The literature suggests that playful approaches include a spectrum of both informal and formal teaching methods such as developing and using games, using playful techniques or 'tactics' (Whitton , 2018., James, 2019). Games are one aspect of playful learning that have been found to improve learning, make learning more 'fun', support team-based learning, make dry topics more engaging and be suitable for particularly challenging or controversial topics (Secker & Morrison, 2022). For example, games that use role play allow players to adopt a 'lusory attitude' which is where during play they accept the rules of the game, even if it makes the game more difficult (Suits, 1978), suspending their disbelief in order to immerse themselves in different environments and / or persona. Interest in the Lego® Serious Play® methodology has also supported the introduction of more playful practices in universities. James and Nerantzi (2019) collected a range of examples about how this method can be utilised to support student engagement, research and enhance academic practice. As noted above, the ability to evoke 'flow' whether when using games or other playful techniques can

be hugely beneficial in terms of engagement with learning. This can then help with problem solving and decision making and it also allows people to feel more comfortable with failure (James, 2019). Playful learning has benefits for staff educational development and it has also been described as a 'signature pedagogy' (Nørgård et al, 2017) that allows staff a safe space for academic experimentation, as well as stimulating intrinsic motivation and educational drive. Meanwhile Lubbers et al (2023) examined the meaning and functions of play in the lives of adults, using a qualitative analysis of over 800 adults' responses to the question, 'what does it mean to be playful?'. They found that play serves an important role in adults making meaningful and emotional connections with others in their lives. Their research also found that adults who play are 'often motivated by the experience of positive emotions, humor, and engagement in activities that promote relationships and are related to positive mental health outcomes' (Lubbers et al, 2023). This final point resonates particularly with the growing concerns about the pressures that higher education staff face post-pandemic, and suggests that support for playful practices may have wider benefits for staff and student wellbeing.

Project Findings

In the focus group discussions, we asked participants to reflect on their own experiences of playful practice, to share their understanding of the term, and to reflect on how it impacts student engagement. We then went on to discuss the benefits and challenges of adopting a playful approach to pedagogy within their teaching contexts, before asking participants to reflect on any support or development activities which could help embed playful approaches in their teaching. Having undertaken a thematic analysis of responses, here we share the key findings of each of these lines of discussion and draw on this analysis to make recommendations for how playful practice could be supported, developed, and improved in HE contexts.

1. Definitions, Examples and Rationale

Focus group participants were quick to provide multiple examples of their experiences of playful practice, both as teachers and as learners. In focus group discussions, a wide range of activities were cited as examples of playful practice. These included the use of existing games and toys in teaching contexts – including Boggle, Cuisenaire Rods, LEGO®, and Playdough – the inclusion of interactive, "gamified" formative activities – including utilization of tools such as Nearpod, Jamboard, Kahoot, and Poll Everywhere – as well as playful activities including ice breakers , team-building exercises, and role-play. One particularly advanced example came from a participant who had created digital and in-person escape room for student induction that involved moving around the campus and solving puzzles.

It was noteworthy that participants appeared to be more confident with giving examples of playful approaches rather than offering a definition of playful practice. One participant defined a playful approach by the way it feels: 'I try and make sure that when we're being playful in the classroom that it's about fun, it's about an atmosphere, and it's about engaging and enjoying what they're doing' (P7). However, on the whole participants were not forthcoming with specific definitions of the term and expressed uncertainty about its meaning. As one participant put it: 'I often get asked […] "what is playful practice?" and it is really difficult to define it. And I've failed so far to adequately describe it to them' (P3). Play was often defined by how it might be experienced – engaging and fun – or by what it is not – serious and boring – though definitive definitions were often harder to reach. In part, this might be because 'playful practice' can incorporate so many different approaches, including creative and arts-based methods, games, quizzes, and specific activities such as role-play.

Lacking a clear definition of the term was seen as an issue by some participants, in part because without a definitive meaning, colleagues and students may be hostile to the term: 'I try to avoid the word "play"

wherever possible. I use "playful" but not "play". It's just because the word in English has got inappropriate connotations. I think managers will accept "playful" whereas they won't accept "play"' (P1). There was a sense of anxiety from some participants that an institutional lack of understanding of the term and its pedagogical benefits could have professional consequences for teachers: 'Because if some student goes and says [anonymised] is doing playful practices and what is it about? You know, there would be a backlash; "is she wasting time on what she is doing? Is she not serious?"' (P13). These anxieties arguably reflect the increasingly formalised qualities of UK HE, where the perception of students as customers can have consequences for pedagogical practice. Participant anxieties were intensified in the context of specific 'serious' disciplines – best defined as subjects that have historically not utilized play in their pedagogy – as well as for teaching large cohorts. In this context, many participants expressed feeling more confident using terms like 'engagement' or 'creativity' rather than 'playful', or in preferring to use 'games' – which might be defined as self-contained tasks with rules to follow – or ice breakers, which relate to specific activities and are thus more readily recognized by colleagues.

Despite these concerns about the definition and perception of play, all participants articulated a clear rationale for the pedagogical value of playful approaches, suggesting that they can promote student engagement and motivation, foster a positive group dynamic, encourage divergent thinking, and make difficult topics more accessible. As one participant put it:

> I could give a 50-minute lecture where everybody falls asleep and learns nothing or I can get them to do something pro-actively and retain the information because it has been useful, it has been engaging, and it has been fun. And I think that fun isn't a dirty word in education; it should be the norm (P6)

Given this powerful pedagogical rationale, supporting staff with feeling confident about incorporating play into their teaching is clearly a priority. Developing a shared definition of 'playful pedagogy' at institutional level and gaining institutional recognition of its benefits may help to assuage staff's fears about being seen as 'frivolous', 'silly' or working counter to the serious business of university education.

2. Benefits and Challenges of Playful Approaches Benefits

Focus group participants identified multiple benefits to using play in their teaching, which can broadly be grouped under the headings of:

1. Student engagement
2. Community-building
3. More complex engagement with the subject

Building on P6's articulation of the value of fun in education above, participants spoke of the value of students enjoying their learning experience and the importance of enjoyment in promoting engagement with both the task and the subject. As one participant put it, they use play 'so that people bounce out of the room instead of falling asleep at the back' (P7). Engagement was seen as beneficial to students' learning experience for multiple reasons:

> I think it's that engagement – however you go about it – that has that really positive impact on the students because they also say 'we feel we've made friends', 'we feel much more able to voice our own opinions', 'we feel like we can take part in our own learning'. And I think all of those are really positive things. (P2)

Playful approaches were seen as particularly beneficial in challenging teaching contexts, where the nature of the class or the subject might historically have led to lack of student engagement: 'Playful approaches give students 'an incentive to come in [for early or difficult classes]. Who wants to start at 9am with some boring class where they're just sitting there listening? I'd say it's a good way to start the day: get them waking up and participating and engaging' (P6). There was a sense that incorporating playful activities helps to mix up standard teaching sessions and increases the energy in the room: 'you bring the LEGO® out and it changes the vibe in the room. Everybody goes "yeah! We're gonna do something fun!"' (P7). Playful approaches were seen as particularly valuable for teaching the 'boring but necessary' (P2) components of a subject as well as challenging or difficult topics: 'For us, just taking away some of that seriousness, some of the anxiety for students is a big deal' (P4). Playful approaches were seen as helpful for 'free[ing] you up so that the concept of correct and incorrect becomes less important' (P10). Lowering the stakes to facilitate engagement was seen as beneficial: 'a lot of people get worried about the technology and get worried about being seen as foolish because they can't use it. And bringing in the games makes it a bit more fun and makes it much more low stakes' (P8). A number of participants identified student fears about 'get[ting] it wrong, either in front of my peers or in front of the lecturer" (P5) as a barrier to student engagement and saw playful approaches as beneficial for avoiding this kind of thinking.

Playful approaches were seen as beneficial to community-building and to fostering a learning environment in which students are confident to share ideas with one another:

> Just this morning I had a new batch of students for the new term and because I get them to do group activities, tackle the questions and then come back, immediately I can see the difference from this very stiff class, sitting in rows and nobody's interacting, to all of a sudden they turn around, introduce themselves, everybody's working as a team. […] and I find this really helps me put them at ease and they're a lot more willing to participate and take chances and give it a go. (P7)

Ultimately, the confidence that students develop in discussion and collaboration helps them to form friendships and to connect with their peers. Playful approaches were also seen as beneficial to positive staff-student relationships:

> Because we do a lot of activity in class and we get to know all the students individually and we encourage them to engage and debate and discuss as well as doing the activities when we're teaching, it has a really positive impact on the students. […] so, in that respect, in terms of the engagement with the students, building up the relationship as a teacher, it's really good that we do a lot of practical stuff, […] rather than just delivering [content]… (P2)

It was also observed that students respond well to the thought and care that staff put into the designing of playful activities: 'students really seem to appreciate the effort. The fact that we've gone to some trouble to try and create an activity that they'll engage with without feeling intimidated and that we've thought [about] from their perspective '(P5). Playful approaches were also seen to benefit staff: 'I think that learning has to be joyful, not just for students but for you too because you can lose your mojo […] so I think you have to make it playful for you as well' (P9).

As well as promoting engagement and building the learning community, playful approaches were seen as integral to fostering deeper learning. In some cases, specific activities might support authentic learning. For example, in certain vocational subjects, activities such as role-play help students develop their practical skills: 'I never get the problem of students saying they feel it's not important or relevant because they know very well that this is exactly the position they're going to be in' (P6). Playful approaches were also seen to provide a space in which students can engage with the subject with greater complexity:

> I would say [playfulness] is almost a prerequisite [to unlearning unhelpful approaches]. Because

> you've got to go from a zone of certainty into a zone where you don't have fixed views, or you admit you're uncertain. And I don't think there are many techniques or tools that allow us to do that, but I think […] it's well-understood how playfulness enables and supports *un*learning. (P1)

Play was also seen to promote intellectual risk-taking and independent learning:

> Through play we can help [students] achieve [distinction] because we're breaking down this idea of just go to lectures, take notes, read the textbook and repeat. It's be confident, take risks, tell us what your ideas are, and don't be afraid of saying the wrong thing, as long as you can back it up with evidence' (P6).

As well as promoting deep learning of their specific discipline, participants suggested that playful approaches can help students to adjust their state of mind about what 'successful' learning looks like:

> you can make mistakes in play and that's not a big deal. And it's part of the play -making mistakes is an important part of learning, so that's fine and it should be accepted as a part of learning. And in a game, when your tower of LEGO® falls over, that's fine. That's nothing to be embarrassed [about], it's not a failure, but it's part of the playing. (P14)

One of the reasons that play can help students to overcome fear of failure is the sense of community and collaboration that these activities foster in a class:

> I feel like the students who struggle are the ones [who] are too shy or they're afraid to sound silly if they ask questions and that's a real shame. So, I think that does help prepare them [for assessments] because it creates this community, it creates this sense that "I'm not alone. If I have a problem, I can ask someone, I can reach out". And the other side is "I'm more engaged in this module, so hopefully that means I will do better because I'm absorbing the information"' (P6)

In this way, the three core benefits of play identified by participants might be seen to be a virtuous cycle: students engage with the subject with greater enthusiasm, which fosters a stronger sense of community in class, which in turn facilitates better learning outcomes and a more complex engagement with the subject.

Challenges

While participants were quick to list many of the benefits associated with playful practice, they did also share a range of challenges which can make it harder to incorporate playful activities into learning and teaching contexts. These can broadly be categorised under the following headings:

1. Negative perceptions of play
2. Inclusivity
3. Resources and logistics

Participants suggested that playfulness can feel risky in an HE context: 'there's always that element of risk with playful learning. And I think that's sometimes why I personally shy away from it. I think "it would be really good if I did this" and then I think "oh but what if they don't like it? […] You just doubt yourself' (P9). This fear of negative learner perceptions was particularly powerful and emerged as a theme in all discussions. In some cases, this negativity was seen to stem from a sense of learner identity and wanting to be taken seriously in the discipline: 'there's a big thing of "I don't want to be seen as childish". I think play is often equated with immaturity or youth […] there's a narrative of "if I'm playing too much then I'm not taking it seriously"' (P11). There was also a sense of students not equating playful approaches with higher education and a feeling of anxiety that play might take away time from 'proper' learning tasks: 'We've had comments from our more mature students who felt like this wasn't a university thing. You know, 'why are you sending us off to do

something like this? We thought we were just going to knuckle down on the first day' (P4). There was also a sense from participants that learners may feel the subject is being taken less seriously when a playful approach is used: 'I think sometimes when the technique looks a bit less serious, *some* students might think that they're learning less, or that somehow you're being a bit flippant about the material itself' (P4). This concern about trivialising the subject was attributed not only to students but to colleagues: 'In an education setting, perhaps people are worried that they're missing out on being assessed correctly. Maybe there's a seriousness that they associate with doing well. There's a social standing thing that if you're enjoying the playful side of things, you won't be seen as serious or as conscientious as some of your colleagues' (P15). The sense that playful practice was something that some staff view with suspicion, while others embrace it, emerged clearly in discussions:

> Definitely convincing colleagues is a challenge, because […] I think generally universities are quite risk-averse institutions. And I think some colleagues are absolutely into it [playfulness] and they're on board and they want to bounce ideas off each other. And then obviously, understandably other colleagues feel like this is not what university should be about. We're not here to play, we're here to be experts and for the students to be serious and studious. And they really enjoy the formal lecture format. And I think there's value in both, so I think it's about compromise. And the challenge is to find that compromise. (P7)

The specific context of higher education was identified as curbing some playful instincts and a sense of one's academic credentials potentially being questioned by the incorporation of playful activities arose in a number of comments: 'I'm always a bit wary coming from FE where everybody was super into play and games and things into HE where you think "[I've] gotta be a bit more serious here". […] I don't wanna push too much because I think "this is not quite proper for university"' (P14).

Despite these issues of perception, the majority of participants felt confident that when the rationale for playfulness was clear, doubters could be won over:

> when I spoke to the students about the playful stuff we'd been doing, they very clearly said they enjoyed it most when they knew why they were doing it. And I think there's that temptation with anything playful that you want it to be a bit magical, so you don't necessarily want to say to them at the start "this is why we're doing it". But actually the more transparent you are, the more willing they are to engage and then the more they enjoy it. And then at the end you can also reflect and say "can you see why we did it now?" (P7)

Nevertheless, there was a recognition that playful approaches will not work for every learner and an acceptance that often there is a need to utilise a variety of activities in teaching contexts: 'It might not work 100% for everyone, but I think education is like that in general, because lectures don't work 100% for everyone […] so I try and switch things around, so it's not always the same thing. So, something will work for someone at some point' (P6).

The question of inclusivity was explicitly raised, and it was recognised that playful techniques are not always appropriate, or may need to be adjusted, for neurodiverse learners:

> I had one student at the end who self-disclosed that she had mild autism and said she'd found the whole [escape room activity] just a bit overwhelming. You know, it's a chaotic thing because everyone's trying to solve things and open boxes and work out what they're doing next; it's deliberately less structured, which a lot of the students like. But […] obviously without that structure it can feel overwhelming. (P5)

Play might also be overwhelming for students who have had difficult experiences in the past:

> '[In] a mindfulness exercise that I did […], one student completely shut down when I suggested we did just a breathing exercise. She wanted to leave the room. It made her incredibly uncomfortable. And I wasn't going to probe that, but I think it's really good to be aware that whatever different strategies we try […] that is going to have reactions with our students and not always expected reactions as well. (P7)

Participants also reflected on international students' experiences of playful activities and how cultural differences may affect students' experiences of play: 'teaching is cultural as well. So different cultures will have different [attitudes to play and] will be even *more* mortified by [playful activities]' (P14). Being sensitive to the diversity of student needs and having contingency plans in place if an activity turns out not to be appropriate for some learners, is therefore an important consideration in session planning.

The time, space and even monetary requirements of playful approaches were identified as logistical challenges associated with this pedagogical approach. Playful approaches often require substantial amounts of staff time to plan and deliver: 'compared to just giving a straight session or talk, you end up spending ten, twenty times as long in preparation sometimes' (P5). Indeed, researching and conceptualising playful activities, especially within disciplines that do not have a tradition of utilising playful pedagogy, can prove prohibitive within a busy academic context: 'I have to go there and find out what are the sources, what people are already doing [in my discipline…but] I don't have time to do that because there's already so much to do and it's easy to do what I'm already doing because I know it' (P13). Planning and the use of rooms, as well as access to appropriate spaces was also an additional logistical consideration raised: 'you want probably a different room with more space so people can move [around freely], so it's all of those things that require so much planning' (P4). The question of financing playful practice also arose:

> I think there's the practical thing of money because with a lot of these activities you're doing something new, so you're having to buy props, resources, prizes […] If it's a pound a student for the prize, the resources, and setting everything up, that's then £300 that we have to find from somewhere. (P5)

Having discussed these challenges with participants, we then invited them to reflect on what support might enable them to embed playful approaches in their practice more fully.

3. **Support and Development**

Focus group participants identified three core areas in which staff could be better supported with utilizing play within their teaching:

1. Sharing and showcasing best practice
2. Fostering a culture of play
3. Resourcing play

Providing opportunities for colleagues to share their work in this area was considered particularly important: 'every time I speak to colleagues about playfulness and creativity, I get a heap of ideas that I'm gonna use and I think the more that we can do that the better' (P7). These opportunities might take the form of networking activities or a playful community, but also providing things like online case studies or a 'how to' guide for staff to consult:

> if you had a really basic 'here are some things you might want to introduce into your teaching' [guide], it might encourage more people to do it. And then the more tutors who are using that, the more students get used to it as a learning tool rather than something frivolous. (P2)

Expanding the role of play from a few one-off sessions into a wider culture of play, was considered particularly important. A key element of this might be a resource in which the benefits of play to student learning are shared: 'Being able to explain to people the benefit of it. So, I think very often we say "here's a fun thing" and they're like "why? Why?" (P8). Creating resources that can be accessed at an institution-wide level, as well as with discipline specific elements would help address staff concerns that playful practice could get them into trouble: '[What if] after all my effort if somebody comes and says 'no, no, no, you're not allowed whatever you like because we have set rules: you go to the lecture, you deliver this…?' (P13). This point also relates to the fostering of a wider culture of play within an institution and the importance of buy-in from senior leaders to playful approaches, especially when playful approaches might seem to diverge from other aspects of institutional policy:

> [It would help to have] a sense that this is something that's valued. I think sometimes you feel, even talking to more senior people, is this something that if the university came in and looked at this would they think 'why are you wasting your time on this? We're meant to be teaching, we're meant to be streamlining, we're meant to be more efficient every day.' And this isn't the most efficient way to do things, but it has lots of advantages. (P5)

Identifying how play can speak to the imperatives of a marketised higher education system is likely to prove essential to its success and longevity as a pedagogical practice. Another important component to fostering a culture of play would be to promote the embedding of play into contexts beyond the classroom, including assessments and meetings. In particular, finding space for playfulness in assessments was considered particularly valuable, so that teaching methods and assessments align.

Participants also acknowledged the importance of practical support with embedding playful practice. As part of fostering a culture of play, resources, both in terms of funding and staff time, would need to be dedicated to supporting staff with embedding play in their teaching:

> having [a budget] set aside so that we don't think "oh god, I'm going to have to go through loads of hoops to try and get money for this" and that sort of thing. And time resourcing as well; so, it's fine to spend a few hours preparing this, even if there's no immediate output from this until you get to the session itself. (P5)

One participant spoke of the value of a shared supply of playful materials:

> we've started building a cupboard in [our department], my "creativity cupboard" as I like to call it […]. So, we've got a giant Jenga, we've got the Boggle games, we've got Articulate […] just because we don't have that stuff necessarily in a university for everybody to just grab and use. And for some colleagues they really appreciate having those things that are [there to use]. They don't just have to make it up off the top of their heads…' (P7)

Conclusion

Our research contributes to the growing body of evidence that recognises the value of playful learning in higher education to improve student engagement, build community and to promote deeper learning. We recognise that our sample size was small and that participants, as staff with existing experience of or interest in playful pedagogy, are likely to be more predisposed to value play. However, these limitations are tempered by the range of disciplines and variety of programmes represented in the study, demonstrating that playful pedagogies can be valuable across diverse learning contexts in HE.

We also have our own biases, as proponents of playful practices, who may have been searching for validation for our work. Nevertheless, our research suggests play can help staff find meaning, connections and inspiration from their teaching practices. The quote from P9 that 'learning needs to be joyful' for both staff and students particularly resonated with us, suggesting that staff are using play to develop what Nørgård et al (2017) call a signature pedagogy. This chimes with one of the core principles of the Playful University which Nørgård and Whitton (2025) define as "aim[ing] for academic joy and life-affirming experiences". We also recognised that the impact of the efforts of staff to use playful practices needs to be better captured and articulated, as one participant said:

> I constantly get testimonials from former students who tell me how they've used elements of playfulness in work presentations, in everyday [working life]. So, it's constantly being reinforced that this stuff is actually useful when they move on... (P7)

Evidencing the value of playful approaches is particularly important in a context in which the spontaneity and exploratory nature of this approach might be seen at odds with the streamlined, top-down business of marketised HE. Yet, as the responses analysed in the benefits section indicate, the opportunities afforded by play for individual learners to find meaning in the material and to connect with the subject in an individualised, non-standardised way, clearly enhances the student experience and could contribute to the personalisation of student learning.

From this research, the following recommendations can be drawn:

1. Staff engaging in playful practice or thinking of using these kinds of techniques do benefit from a community-based approach. Participants in the study were clear that the support of colleagues was beneficial in testing ideas, overcoming some of the challenges around perception and sharing of resources.
2. Playful techniques can support student engagement, although more systematic research into the impact of playful techniques, particularly through the lens of inclusion, is needed. This would also assist staff with making the case for utilising these kinds of pedagogies.
3. There is a need for institutions to articulate support for playful techniques, both from a cultural and a resourcing perspective.

As a next step, we plan to share these findings and recommendations with senior managers at our institution to highlight the need and value of supporting a Playful Practice community. However, we also identified a range of challenges associated with implementing playful practice, including the negative perceptions of play, issues of inclusivity, and a lack of resourcing. We hope that our recommendations will help us and others who support staff to overcome the challenges identified and to embed playfulness in their teaching practice. We also feel that there are wider benefits in expanding and developing our Playful Practice community and plan to continue our research. We hope to explore Lubbers at al's (2023) suggestion that play promotes relationships between staff and leads to positive mental health outcomes for an institution. This remains an underexplored

aspect of why playful practice should not just be tolerated but widely encouraged as a valid approach to teaching and learning in higher education.

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