

Book Review: Playful Learning, Events and Activities to Engage Adults.

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Review

“Playfulness is an approach that embraces whimsy, the spirit of the carnival, creativity, humour, surprise and imagination.” (p. 14)

Whilst play within education and training is still regarded by many as a frivolous approach, its value is beginning to gain recognition. This book is therefore a timely and practical introduction for any educator or event organiser wishing to integrate some playfulness into their work. The concept and benefits of playful learning are presented via theory and extensive experiences. Contributions are from a diversity of voices, including academic, professional services and corporate planning, providing a broad perspective along with a wealth of hints and tips. The Playful Learning Conference is the source of many of the examples and as such affords a unique situation where play is not only expected but embraced by participants. This offers the authors a safe space to experiment and therefore impart what works well, what doesn't and what can be transferred to other events. That's not to say, however, that examples from across different sectors and situations are neglected.

The core of the book collates evidence from all contributing authors to create a comprehensive suite of case studies and advice across the four main headings below.

Designing Playful Experiences

These chapters highlight the differences not only between child and adult play but between play and playfulness. Understanding these differences is crucial to the successful design of playful experiences. Each chapter shares practical advice based on years of experience, both successes and failures, including how best to manage risk and to ensure that the design is as inclusive and accessible as possible. Space is also discussed

along with the need for buy-in from all stakeholders to ensure smooth running of the event. Being audience aware is crucial and examples are given of activities that worked well in one context but not so well in another.

“We also learnt that ‘success’ is not always defined by the number of active participants.” (p. 54)

Creating Playful Spaces

The word *icebreaker* is enough to send most of us into a cold sweat, but these are presented as being more voluntary playful interludes and less the imposed, uncomfortable experiences that we are familiar with. Permission to play is a crucial element of playful learning, whether this comes from senior management or from event organisers. Getting that all-important acceptance of play within a professional learning environment is fundamental to the success of the approach, be it games, creative production, quizzes or escape rooms. Guidance covers not only giving permission but also on navigating participant motivation and engagement; how to skilfully navigate the range, from sceptic to over-enthusiast.

Engaging People Playfully

This section picks up and expands from the previous chapters, exploring the variety of ways people are involved in playful learning, such as players, playmakers and the public. Advice on how to work effectively with different partners and how to successfully design conference games for maximum impact.

Playful Practice

The final chapters cover playful presentations, tools and technologies and evaluations. Each of these are well-known to the reader but we are pushed to rethink them, and are encouraged to make some simple playful, interactive changes, such as polling or games, to augment the level of participant engagement. The passion for playful learning emanates throughout the book, yet this passion isn't blinkered. Every chapter is presented in a refreshingly open and honest way, and the authors don't shy away from revealing the elements that didn't work as well as those that were an outright success. Reflection and reflexivity are evident from start to finish. Details are shared of how activities have been refined several times to improve their effectiveness.

It is acknowledged that a degree of risk is involved in introducing playfulness and advice throughout is to start small and build in complexity as you gain confidence. Examples and case studies range from basic activities that require minimal time and effort through to day long events that require a significant amount of organisation.

“Play means many different things to many people and it is important to recognise its many forms.”
(p.133)

Common threads weave together across the chapters – highlighting areas of risk, navigating expectations, reiterating the benefits of planning and testing (and more testing), ensuring buy-in from all stakeholders, the need for flexibility and of course the necessity of a back-up plan. Physical, tactile approaches are at the forefront to many activities, with an expectation that events are face-to-face. However, the use of digital technology is advocated to both enhance experiences on site and permit wider participation from those not at the event. At the centre of both are people and consideration is given to prioritising people first, regardless of approach.

It must be noted however, that this is a guide book rather than a recipe book. It is overflowing with case studies and examples of games, activities and themes (pirates are apparently a sure-fire winner) to provide stimulus and inspiration. The finer details of designs are left to us, for our own creative juices to devise. I thoroughly recommend this book to anyone involved with events, private or educational, and would defy anyone to come away without at least one idea on how to add some playfulness to their next event. This is a joyful book to revisit again and again.