
Compassionate Play: why playful teaching is a prescription for good mental health (for you and your students)

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Keywords:

Mental health

Compassionate pedagogy

Contemplative pedagogy

LEGO Serious Play

Collage

Mindfulness

ABSTRACT

This article explores the softer side of play, considering the affordances of teaching at the reflective and contemplative end of the playful learning spectrum. Inspired by both contemplative and compassionate pedagogies plus practice-based enquiry, it argues for the positive impact that playful learning can have on student and staff mental health. The article explores the way that a playful teaching approach can benefit both students and teachers within UK Higher Education: a sector where high levels of poor mental health among both groups are well-documented. The affordances of combining playful learning with compassionate and contemplative pedagogies are identified: these include the development of skills in empathy, listening and reflection, and the provision of safe spaces for identity work.

The article ends with some practical recommendations for teachers who would like to adopt this compassionate approach in both their playful practice and their own development.

Introduction

“The opposite of play....is depression.” (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p.198)

When a teaching colleague suggested that my LEGO® Serious Play® sessions should be offered as “therapy for stressed students.” (staff feedback 11.11.19) I was a little surprised. However, if we take the view that “play is important in countering the implicit threat that occurs when we are in transitional spaces” (p26 Sinfield et al 2019) then perhaps they have a point.

This article makes the case for the softer side of playful teaching, as an antidote to the anxieties that can block learning and as a way to make both learning and teaching more joyful, thoughtful and compassionate. This quieter, lighter aspect of playful pedagogy is sometimes forgotten: playful learning is not just about lively, competitive activity. “We play quietly, alone, peacefully, in our heads, or through interests we pursue alone,

(jigsaw puzzles, crosswords, fantasies and imaginings), not just by tearing around with others.” (James, 2019, p.8).

Having experienced periods of poor mental health throughout my teaching career I have some understanding of the ways in which an academic role with its associated demands and pressures can negatively impact on one’s state of mind. Looking back over my years working in education, I can see how becoming a playful educator has been a way for me to counter my own tendency towards anxiety, depression and underlying low self-esteem. Like Maarten Koeners “I discovered that I was the keeper of my own medicine, a remedy that could counteract my fear of failing, my avoidance of risk and my highly cultivated, and often debilitating, goal-oriented behaviour. What was this personal discovery? It was play.” (2020) For me, taking a playful approach is not just about considering the mental health of students: being a playful teacher makes me feel calmer, happier and more relaxed too.

In this article I argue that having a playful attitude to one’s teaching is not just about supporting positive student mental health alongside learning (although this is vitally important). Being playful also supports us as teachers to exercise self-compassion, to be present ‘in the moment’ and to explore our pedagogic identity. Here I intertwine observations from my teaching practice with scholarship from the global playful learning community to explore two theoretical perspectives relating to positive mental health within UK Higher Education: these are compassionate pedagogy and contemplative pedagogy. Each of these will be examined through a playful learning lens, and practical examples will be used to make the case for playful learning to support the mental health of both teachers and students.

I’ll go on to offer some concrete strategies for playful learning to support positive mental health, drawing from my own practice and linking to the two strands of compassion and contemplation in teaching. The affordances of these pedagogical approaches for teachers and learners will be identified and discussed.

Finally, I’ll present a visual model for teaching, combining compassionate, contemplative and playful pedagogies. This will include the key affordances and attributes offered by this empathetic, playful approach.

Compassionate Play in Context

COVID-19

‘I could tell you my adventures - beginning from this morning,’ said Alice a little timidly: ‘but it’s no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then. (Carroll, 2009, p.125)

Since submitting the abstract for this article, we and the world have changed. It is impossible to ignore this seismic shift, and some may view playfulness as trivial within the context of a global pandemic. However, if looking after our mental health was important before Covid-19, it is now undoubtedly of huge significance: “young adults were more likely to report stress arising from the pandemic than the population as a whole.” (Mental Health Foundation 2020). In this context play can help us to make sense of things, to survive, and even

to thrive: “In a complex world of constant change and uncertainty, play is a way to cope, navigate, create and exist.” (Counterplay 2020)

The examples I will discuss are emphatically analogue but my work in progress is to adapt these playful, mindful pedagogic principles into the new ‘normal’ of blended learning until we can meet again ‘in real life’.

COVID-19: Playfulness in dark times

My focus is on ‘Playfulness’ rather than ‘Play’, as I see this as a way of being in the world that can impact on all aspects of learning and teaching: “Playfulness is a more important consideration than play. The former is an attitude of mind; the latter is a passing outward manifestation of this attitude” (Dewey, 1910, p.162).

It may seem very difficult, if not impossible, for us to maintain a playful state of mind when our mental health is fragile, and according to Sutton-Smith’s play scale of development, the inability to play may be seen as a signifier of “mental illness or highly stressful circumstances” (1997 p.45).

However, alongside the darkness of the past months there has been a resurgence of interest in playful and creative activity among the population as a whole, such as the ‘crafternoons’ organised by the MIND charity (2020b). Whether for connection, distraction, mindfulness or just light relief, playfulness has always had a place, even in the darkest of times. Mitchel Resnick writes movingly about his visit to Anne Frank’s house, and of her playful escapades such as writing a “pun-filled poem” and hiding presents in her family’s shoes: “When I think of Anne Frank, I certainly don’t think about fun and games – but I do think about her playful way of engaging with the world” (2017, p.129).

I would argue that playfulness, especially in the form of soothing compassionate play, can help to provide comfort, alleviating negative emotions and providing a place where positive feelings can be nurtured. Being playful, in life as well as in the classroom (virtual or otherwise), can be an essential survival skill, providing spaces for human connection or quiet reflection.

Decolonising Universities Context

The world has changed in other ways since I first proposed this article: the Black Lives Matter movement has brought institutional racism and injustice to the forefront of our consciousness, and the higher education sector has been the focus of much debate in relation to decolonising the curriculum and the entire university culture. My own institution, for example, currently has a wide-ranging ‘Decolonising DMU’ (De Montfort University, (2021) project: however, there is an enormous amount of work to be done here. In the context of this paper, it’s important to note the particular mental health challenges that exist for staff and students of colour: a survey by MIND found that that existing inequalities have made the mental health of BAME groups worse during the pandemic (2020).

I am also aware that for students and staff who are institutionally marginalised, there may be additional barriers to participation in some of the activities outlined below. In spite of this, I am hopeful that compassionate, playful teaching may be useful in amplifying voices that are usually unheard alongside fostering good mental health: I was encouraged by witnessing the way that the central storytelling aspect of LEGO® Serious Play® allowed students working on the DMU Freedom to Achieve project focusing on the attainment gap (De Montfort University, 2021b) a safe space to express sensitive and difficult emotions.

Mental Health v Wellbeing

The term 'Wellbeing' with its broader, more positive connotations is more widely used within educational circles than 'Mental Health': wellbeing is difficult to clearly define, but the New Economics Foundation describe it as "...how people feel and how they function, both on a personal and a social level, and how they evaluate their lives as a whole." (2012, p.6) Learning that considers the 'whole person' is vital as our mental state and our learning are interlinked: "...teachers and learners need to be treated holistically, not only for the sake of their wellbeing but also because the strength of that wellbeing will impact on their learning" (Ashton & Stone, 2018, p.173).

The terms 'mental health' and 'mental wellbeing' are often used interchangeably: here I'm choosing to use the term 'Mental health', which embraces the full spectrum of mental health, good and bad, and includes 'Mental health problems'. This scope of this article does not attempt to cover the huge variety of mental health conditions that exist, but this term allows me to focus on some of the mental health issues most commonly cited within universities, such as anxiety and depression. This definition of mental health from the charity MIND comes closest to my understanding of the term: "Mental health is about how we think, feel and act. Just like physical health: everybody has it and we need to take care of it." (2020c)

Compassion, Self-Compassion and Compassionate Pedagogy

Of the many definitions of compassion, spiritual and secular, I am choosing to use that of Paul Gibbs: "...attentiveness to, and an agency, or willingness, to alleviate the suffering of others in order to increase their chosen contentment can be considered compassion" (2017, p.3). Although related to empathy, compassion is not just about being aware of the difficulties or needs of others, but crucially, to be compassionate means that you are willing to take action to help others.

"Self-compassion is an emotionally positive self-attitude that should protect against the negative consequences of self-judgment, isolation, and rumination (such as depression)" (Neff, 2003, p.87). Kathryn Waddington states that "...self-compassionate individuals have better psychological health than those who lack self-compassion." and that "Greater self-compassion predicts lower levels of anxiety and depression..." (2017, p.51). For teachers, self-compassion is particularly hard to achieve: the notion of being kind to ourselves and putting ourselves first goes against the accepted culture of universities where students are always our first priority for 'good' teachers.

Jess Hancock uses the question of how quickly teachers should respond to student emails to highlight the common dilemma of balancing self-compassion and compassion for students: "It was noted that a balance between self-compassion and compassion for others was difficult, but could be achieved through managing student expectations from the outset" (2018, p.67).

In education, taking a compassionate approach as a learner, is diametrically opposed to the emphasis on competition and individual success that is seen in particular subject disciplines: "Compassionate pedagogy is about ensuring that our teaching and interactions with students and colleagues are based on kindness, and followed through by actions and practices that alleviate suffering and promote wellbeing." (University of Westminster, 2019)

Contemplative Practices and Contemplative Pedagogy

"The experiential methods developed within the contemplative traditions offer a rich set of tools for exploring the mind, the heart, and the world." (Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, 2015) Contemplative practices is an umbrella term for a range of activities involving introspection with the aim of developing enhanced awareness of one's own thought processes. One of the most widely used of these practices is mindfulness meditation: "Mindfulness meditation encourages us to become more patient and compassionate with ourselves" and can "free us from the gravitational pull of anxiety, stress and unhappiness..." (Williams & Penman, 2011, p.12). Contemplative pedagogy harnesses practices usually associated with spiritual rituals or religious beliefs and applies these to an educational context: "...the natural capacity for contemplation balances and enriches the analytic. It has the potential to enhance performance, character, and depth of the student's experience" (Hart, 2004, p.45).

Compassionate Pedagogy and Playful Learning

Compassionate pedagogy entails an equal and respectful relationship between teacher and student: "In compassion, we identify with the struggles of another, and as a teacher, for example, we may remember what it was like to be a struggling student, burdened by loans and tests and the real uncertainty of the future" (White, 2017, p.20). Taking a playful approach to teaching can encourage compassion through relaxed, informal learning environments, objects with "playful affordances" (Frissen et al, 2015, p.22) and methodologies that focus on inclusivity, listening and empathy.

In my own practice and through the work of Writing PAD (Reeve, 2019) I have discovered that arts-based teaching approaches such as drawing and collage can offer playful paths to compassionate teaching (Reeve, 2019). It was my discovery of LEGO® Serious Play® though, in particular Alison James' warm and empathetic take on this method, that provided an endlessly adaptable, democratic and playful route to compassionate pedagogy. This is not to dismiss other activities such as working with modelling clay or paper manipulation, which can also be part of a compassionate and playful learning and teaching experience.

Since becoming an accredited LEGO® Serious Play® facilitator LSP and adaptations of this method has become central to my practice, complementing my other multisensory arts-based approaches. The methodology resonates closely with compassionate teaching, focusing as it does on providing all participants with an equal chance to speak, active listening and opportunities to creatively explore both learner and teacher identities. The metaphorical nature of the method elicits insights among participants that would not be discovered via less playful means: “Serious play is not the building of literal models, but rather constructing metaphorical and symbolic creations that represent problems, solutions, realizations, and models of communication...” (James & Brookfield, 2014, p.116).

Affordances of a Compassionate and Playful Pedagogy

Empathy

In my own practice with staff, researchers and students I regularly witness the way that LSP engages learners with one another students and stimulates rich discussion and insight, particularly on the emotional aspects of the learning journey.

Having the ability to ‘step into another’s shoes’ and see the world from their point of view is a vital skill for both learning and life. Sharing our own personal stories and being truly ‘heard’ can be beneficial for our mental health and I would argue that this aspect of LSP can be part of a compassionate pedagogy. Using LEGO® bricks as part of a compassionate pedagogic approach does not have to follow the LSP method: Martin Purcell used exercises with LEGO® with Youth Work students to explore their understanding of themselves as professionals. These activities developed the capacity for empathy among students: they “...opened up spaces for conversations not previously pursued (e.g. convictions and aspirations), helping to strengthen bonds of mutual support and understanding” (Purcell, 2019, p.243).

In my own practice using LSP I have observed the way that the process quickly enables learners to understand the perspectives of others: “...to reflect not only on myself but the team I will be working with for the next couple of years. Interesting to reflect on shared concepts/differences” (EMBA student induction 3.10.2019).

Identity Work

Allowing space to explore multiple identity positions, both as teachers and learners, is vital in supporting positive mental health. I will chiefly focus on social and emotional aspects of both professional identity for HE teachers and learner identity for students. Making the transition into university teaching can be experienced “as a stressful period characterised by feelings of uncertainty, self-doubt, and inadequacy” (Van Lankveld et al, 2017, p.329). Students may also experience difficulty in making the transition into and through education: “between worlds, between social classes and in alien educational settings” (Sinfield et al 2019, p.26).

Using LEGO® to build models of their professional identities allowed Jess Hancock’s PhD students to playfully consider self-compassion in relation to their prospective teaching roles: “The dialogues that emerged from the

model-combining activities and the whole group discussion at the end demonstrated that this had also been a beneficial way of provoking consideration of self-compassion" (2018, p.70). My own experience of Jess's workshop was powerful: this "playful compassionate identity" process, though not exactly true to the LSP 'system', opened up similar possibilities for compassion towards both myself and others. Physically building some of the stressors present in university life gave me a new and kinder perspective on my academic self: "My model of a 'personal stressor' within my HE experience was quite scary: I was positioned between the ferocious shark of low self-esteem and the lovely white horse of pedagogic leadership" (Reeve, 2019).

Listening Skills

"Listening with respect and without interruption" (1999, p.24) is one of the key components of Kline's concept of the "Thinking Environment". Listening is seen as vital to high quality thinking and also wellbeing: "I think we should become seed-sowers of confidence and intelligence in the people around us by doing this simple thing" (Kline, 1999, p.63).

So how to playfully yet compassionately develop listening skills? One of the key features of LSP is to listen with full attention, benefitting both speakers and listeners: "This gives more 'junior' or less vocal members of a team the chance to have a say, and perhaps more importantly offers the 'senior' or dominant members the opportunity to listen to insights and challenges which they may not have otherwise heard" (Gauntlett, 2010).

The experience of being truly 'listened to' is empowering for students, researchers and teachers alike: Ross Purves in his LEGO® workshops with MA Music Education students, observed that students were "...typically fascinated by each other's models and the associated meanings and wanted more time to explore these." and students commented that "It was fascinating hearing what other groups came up with" (Purves, 2019).

Appreciation

"It is not enough to be compassionate, we must act." (Dali Lama, 2012). An essential difference between compassion and empathy is that compassion indicates action to help others in addition to being aware of their feelings and needs. From a psychological standpoint, being appreciated by others has an important role in our mental health: "...as humans, we feel safe when we have created positive feelings in people's minds about us, and we feel more secure in supportive, predictable networks" (Gilbert, 2013, p.201).

Appreciation circles, where each person takes a turn to say something positive about another member of the group, have been used in educational settings to offer students a way of demonstrably valuing one another's thoughts, attributes and actions: Kline suggests that these offer a "way for each student to be concretely appreciated by one of their peers..."(1999, p.212).

In a playful learning context, Alison James has adapted the LSP methodology to offer a particularly compassionate element. As part of her workshops with research students, she asks each participant to build a

LEGO® ‘gift’ for another group member who is chosen at random in response to the question: “Make a model for one of your peers that would help them resolve their biggest challenge” (Nerantzi & James, 2019, p.39).

Contemplative Pedagogy and Playful Learning

“Like the soil, mind is fertilized while it lies fallow, until a new burst of bloom ensues.”

(Dewey, 1934)

Contemplative pedagogy is a teaching approach that focuses on introspective practices in order to increase awareness of thoughts and feelings and focus attention on the present moment (Barbezat et al, 2014). Activities such as mindfulness meditation can be used to refocus the mind on simply ‘being’ rather than ‘doing’, offering “a vantage point – from which we can witness our own thoughts and feelings as they arise” (Williams & Penman, 2011, p.11).

Mindfulness is increasingly used as a therapeutic method to support improved mental health, and these contemplative practices can help to “...manage and prevent feelings of depression, stress, anxiety, or discontent.” (Oxford Mindfulness Centre, 2020). Participating in contemplative learning and teaching practices can link the learner’s whole self more closely to the curriculum: “Suddenly their interiority enters the curriculum in ways that are usually not present within day-to-day pedagogical practice” (Ergas, 2019, p.27).

Rughani & Barton’s workshop, *Contemplative pedagogies - collective/co- mindfulness as pedagogic space* (2016) introduced a playful notion of contemplative practice, combining white LEGO® pieces, low lighting and a loose, ‘drop-in’ structure. Participants were asked to “...consider their use and development of contemplative space both in their own pedagogic practice and the potential for co-creating such spaces in collaboration with students.” (Rughani & Barton, 2016). My own practice combines playful inspiration from this workshop with mindfulness meditation to create mindful LEGO® sessions to foster positive mental health through meditative, tactile activities using white and clear LEGO® bricks.

As a facilitator leading a contemplative activity, whether as a stand-alone session, precursor to a taught session or ‘wind down’ following an assessment, the mental health benefits are tangible. Along with participants, I enter a quiet space, my breathing slows and I am focussing on the present moment.

Affordances of a Contemplative and Playful Pedagogy

Reflection

Reflection is an important way of supporting positive mental health through the ability to gain distance and perspective on academic life: “Reflection may provide quiet time to step back from the pressures of study, work and life to sort and process and learn from the experience or activity and your thoughts and feelings.” (Harvey et al, 2020, p.16). Contemplative practices can offer a useful route to reflection, but reflection may also involve

imaginative and playful techniques such as: "...creative/expressive media including video, photography, storytelling, poetry, dance/movement, drama, music/song and art" (Harvey et al, 2020, p.19).

I have found that the "Swollage" (Reeve & Towlson, 2019) technique, combining free-association collage with a personal 'SWOT' (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis provides a playful path to reflection for students and staff alike. This technique, using a playful environment that is reminiscent of childhood with piles of magazines for cutting out, scissors, felt pens and glue, helped students who were struggling with both their confidence and their understanding of reflection: "Students enjoyed this novel approach to learning and the activity appeared to achieve the aim of boosting self-esteem and offering an alternate tool for self-reflection" (Lecturer feedback). 'Playful Reflection with Collage' was also used at the Playful Learning SIG: "With students, going straight to reflection is hard - the collage builds a bridge into the reflection. You start with some words and ideas and not starting with a blank piece of paper." (PL SIG notes, 21.11.19).

Alleviation of Anxiety

A study of depression and anxiety levels in US students described the way that high levels of stress can impact on mental health and learning: "Stress interferes with critical thinking, concentration and overall well-being" (Billias, 2017, p1.43).

Playfulness combined with a contemplative approach can help to mitigate anxious feelings among teachers and staff alike. By adapting mindfulness practices using white and clear LEGO® bricks, I create a playful space for quiet contemplation. The bricks, themselves having a "playful affordance" instantly communicate that the session is not too 'serious' in nature. By using only white and clear bricks I create a sense of calm with fewer distractions, gentle background music and LED 'candles' to 'soften' the atmosphere. "I could only pop in for 10 minutes but already I'm going back with new thoughts and ideas and a calm mind!" (participant DMU Festival of teaching, 2019)

Focus

Taking part in contemplative practices such as mindfulness meditation can help us to have a clearer mental state, helping to counter the anxieties that "block learning" and to tackle academic work in a calmer, and more effective way. "The focus on the present leaves no room for preoccupation or anxiety about the outcome and allows attention to engage fully to optimise performance." (Hassad & Chambers, 2014, p.137). Rachel Stead asked her students to create metaphorical Play-Doh models to represent key concept within their curriculum: as well as providing "deeper thinking about the topics" (2019, p.233) this playful pedagogy also provided mental health benefits: "Keywords which surfaced repeatedly in the feedback were informal, calm, relaxing, therapeutic and fun" (Stead, 2019, p.234).

Similar themes have arisen in my own playful practice, not just those that were explicitly contemplative in approach, such as Mindful LEGO®, but also less obviously meditative sessions such as those using LEGO® Serious Play®. Participants in an ‘Exploring your doctoral research with LSP’ workshop commented on the “therapeutic and self-reflective.” (DC LSP, 21.3.18) nature of the session, while teaching staff found that an ‘Introduction to LSP’ workshop gave them space to focus on “Re-establishing priorities.” (LSP staff, 2.5.19).

Mindfulness

Activities such as mindfulness meditation are becoming more embedded into the HE curriculum, rather than being seen as purely separate welfare offerings that do not relate to learning: The Advance HE Embedding Mental Wellbeing in the Curriculum Report puts forward “principles for designing and teaching the curriculum that takes account of the links between mental wellbeing and learning” (Houghton & Anderson, 2017). In a pedagogic setting, contemplative pedagogy can be used to ensure that both teacher and learners are fully ‘present’ during a class. Ashton & Stone give the example of a lecturer introducing a pause for “quiet time” at the start of a session for mindful breathing and sharing of feelings in order to prevent “teaching on auto-pilot” (2018, p.36).

Hart softens the environment by lowering the lights and invites learners to give their attention to their physical sensations and breathing, imagining “thoughts or concerns floating like bubbles from underwater” (Hart, 2004, p.45). Mindfulness can be creative and playful too. Activities involving mindful observation of the natural environment can help us to focus on the present moment through close observation of a “natural organism...such as a flower, insect, clouds, or the moon” (Harvey et al, 2020, p.108). Using an object with “playful affordances” (Frissen et al, 2015, p.22) such as LEGO® bricks as the focus of attention, brings another dimension to mindfulness, the bricks themselves: “The LEGO® brick was invented specifically to provide children with new opportunities to imagine, create and share” (Resnick, 2017, p.41).

The combination of ‘being present’ with playful imagination that results is best summed up by this student: “I only thought about which brick to choose next. I didn’t plan anything but ended up with a masterpiece” (student feedback).

What can the Playful Teacher offer to support positive mental health?

In addition to offering a different perspective on compassionate and contemplative pedagogies, playful learning offers its own positive mental health affordances. One of the things that I regularly notice during playful learning sessions is the positive emotions experienced. Playful pedagogy, whether via arts-based techniques such as collage, or mediating objects such as LEGO® models, often result in smiles and even laughter. As well as countering negative emotions such as anxiety, playfully fostering positive emotion has benefits to learning: “...when learning is a source of pleasure, learners will have an intrinsic motivation to study, a willingness to take risks and a desire to tackle challenges” (Ashton & Stone, 2018, p.69).

As one PhD student put it: “Playing with Legos reminded me that my PhD is, at its very core, a thing of joy” (student feedback).

Playful learning also enhances engagement: Judith McCulloch explored this issue with maths teachers, alongside considerations about maths anxiety, through various model making activities using Meccano and LEGO® bricks. One of the playful approaches, using incomplete Meccano model parts and unclear instructions, was found to encourage engagement: “...this challenge stimulates engagement and creates opportunities for active learning through application” (McCulloch, 2019, p.169).

Certain playful approaches, such as LSP where “Everybody has a voice and shares their thoughts, reflections, ideas and feelings” (Nerantzi & James, 2019, p.15) actively support an inclusive teaching and learning approach, where difficult issues can be safely explored. Although as an LSP facilitator it is important to ensure that participants only disclose what they are comfortable to share, with clear ground rules in place this method can offer a space where difference is recognised and embraced. For staff it can be a helpful vehicle for flattening hierarchies and improving agency: an LSP workshop for DMU School of Engineering staff “got them thinking about where they are today and then aspiring to be the best versions of themselves in a school that they would like to be part of” (staff feedback).

Finally, a key ingredient of playful learning is imagination: Johan Roos describes the invention of LSP as “enabling managers to think beyond conventions” (Nerazzi & James, 2019, p.12) and feedback from my playful sessions regularly uses the term “thinking outside the box”. The freedom to fantasise and to play imaginatively can be empowering: “Do you remember, when no one was watching you, the way you talked with your imaginary playmates and how sure you were that the gang of you could do anything?” (Kline, 1999, p.249).

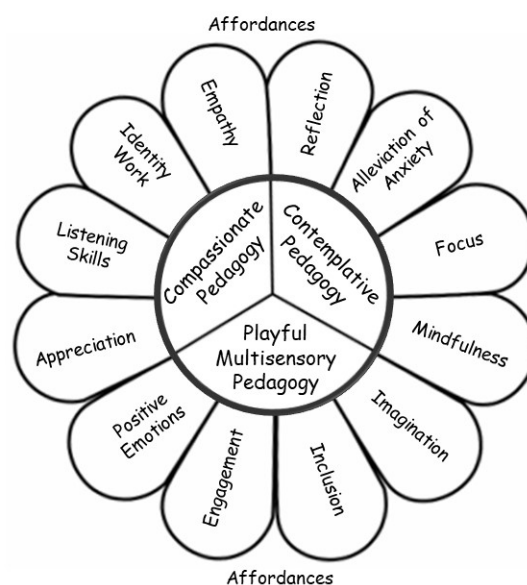


Fig1 Blossom model

Blossom Model

This model, combining the three elements of compassionate, contemplative and playful pedagogies in the centre, surrounded by the affordances offered by each, I've called the Blossom teaching model. All three elements support a nurturing learning and teaching philosophy, designed like Martin Purcell's use of LEGO® to explore the concept of 'Professional Love' in youth work, to "enhance the young person's sense of self-worth and flourishing" (2019, p.243). Informed by Nerantzi's Playground Model (2015) and Resnick's Creative Learning Spiral (2017) the Blossom model sees learning as an holistic and organic process and uses a plant-based metaphor to represent positive learning and mental health as parts of a blossoming flower.

The Blossom Model in Action: Two Sessions

The following practical teaching examples, applicable to a variety of educational contexts including staff development and curriculum delivery, embody the Blossom approach, intertwining its three components of compassionate, contemplative and playful pedagogies and supporting the affordances of these.

Collage for Self-Compassion

This method was drawn from my experiences with the Swollage (Reeve & Towlson, 2019) technique for self-reflection, and encourages a gentle and kindly approach to the self, whether from a professional or personal perspective. Using collage offers a playful and childlike vehicle for self-reflection, as well as a visual record of feelings, thoughts or goals that can be re-visited later. It can be used by individuals, or in small or large groups.

Materials

- Large sheet of paper, ideally at least A3
- Scissors
- Glue
- Post-it notes
- A variety of magazines, newspapers, flyers – whatever printed material you can find

Time

- Around two hours

Process

1. Set your intention. Ask participants what they wish to focus on for this activity, or set out the main theme, e.g. future career goals or identifying key strengths.
2. Collect images. Ask participants to cut or rip out images that appeal to them or that they feel a connection with. Encourage them not to overthink this process or search for specific images.
3. Cut out images. Once they have a pile of paper in front of them, ask participants to either cut out or tear round their chosen images.
4. Stick down images. Ask participants to arrange their images on a large sheet of paper and stick them down.
5. Identify themes. Invite participants to reflect on any themes suggested by their collage and label these with post-it notes.
6. Look deeper. Ask participants whether individual images within the collage suggest further themes/words – if so, ask them to label these with post-it notes.
7. Personal attributes. If appropriate to their intention, ask participants to consider any personal attributes, skills or strengths suggested by images within their collage and label these as before.
8. Share. Ask participants to share their collages with a partner and discuss different interpretations of one another's collages.



Fig 2 Collage

A Mindful LEGO® Meditation

This method combined my interest in mindfulness meditation with my interest in LEGO® bricks as a focus for quiet and unstructured model-making as opposed to the more systematic and lively methodology of LSP. It can be used to tackle exam anxiety, as a mental break from academic tasks or to encourage social connection without necessarily the need for conversation (I have used this regularly with groups of autistic spectrum students as part of an induction process). The instructions can be written and/or spoken, and the session is suitable for individuals or groups. It can also work well as an outdoor activity.

Materials

- White and clear LEGO® bricks (I use architectural LEGO® as it has a wide variety of textures and shapes).
- Thought bubble cards or post-it notes

Time

- Around one hour – this can also work as a drop-in session.

Process

- Read the following prompts (they can also be printed and left on tables).

1 Slow down

Look at the bricks, noticing texture, shape & size

Feel the bricks, noticing the different shapes & textures (close your eyes if you wish)

Connect the bricks together, one by one (don't try to build a specific object)

Focus on the process of slowly connecting bricks – if your mind wanders, gently guide it back to the present

2 Reflect

Look at the model(s) you have made – what do they suggest to you?

How does your model differ to others?

How did you feel while building?

Do you feel different in any way to when you started the Mindful LEGO® activity?

Did the activity trigger any new thoughts?

3 Share

If you are happy to, please share any thoughts, reflections and suggestions that have bubbled up during the activity on a thought bubble card/post-it note and hang on a tree/add to a whiteboard.



Fig 3 Mindful LEGO®

Conclusion

This paper argues that a gentle, playful, multi-sensory approach to learning can provide mental health benefits to teachers and students alike. By reflecting on personal and professional experiences, and considering both compassionate and contemplative pedagogies through a playful lens, I identify the key affordances for learning and teaching provided by marrying the compassionate, the contemplative and the playful. Other benefits for mental health inherent in a playful learning approach such as the fostering of positive emotion and the

provision of safe spaces for storytelling are also identified. A pedagogic model, Blossom, deploying a flower metaphor to communicate the fusing together of compassionate, contemplative and playful pedagogies, is presented: each petal contains an affordance provided by this learning and teaching approach. Finally, two sessions are outlined, showing this pedagogy in action: 'Collage for Self-Compassion' and 'A Mindful LEGO® Meditation.'

As I write I am wrestling with the challenge of adapting playful, mindful teaching practices for remote teaching. Early experiments indicate that there is scope to capture some of the affordances of the Blossom model 'through the screen': the creative challenge of online learning may even offer some new ways to learn with kindness and creativity. I do miss the human connection of teaching playfully 'in real life', and look forward to being a playful educator in the physical as well as the digital world.

Providing spaces for learners and educators to explore identity, to reflect and to develop empathy while also supporting their mental health is even more vital in the new learning and living landscape we are entering. Being compassionate, like being playful, is part of what it is to be human:

"Compassion is not religious business, it is human business, it is not luxury, it is essential for our own peace and mental stability, it is essential for human survival."

The Dalai Lama

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